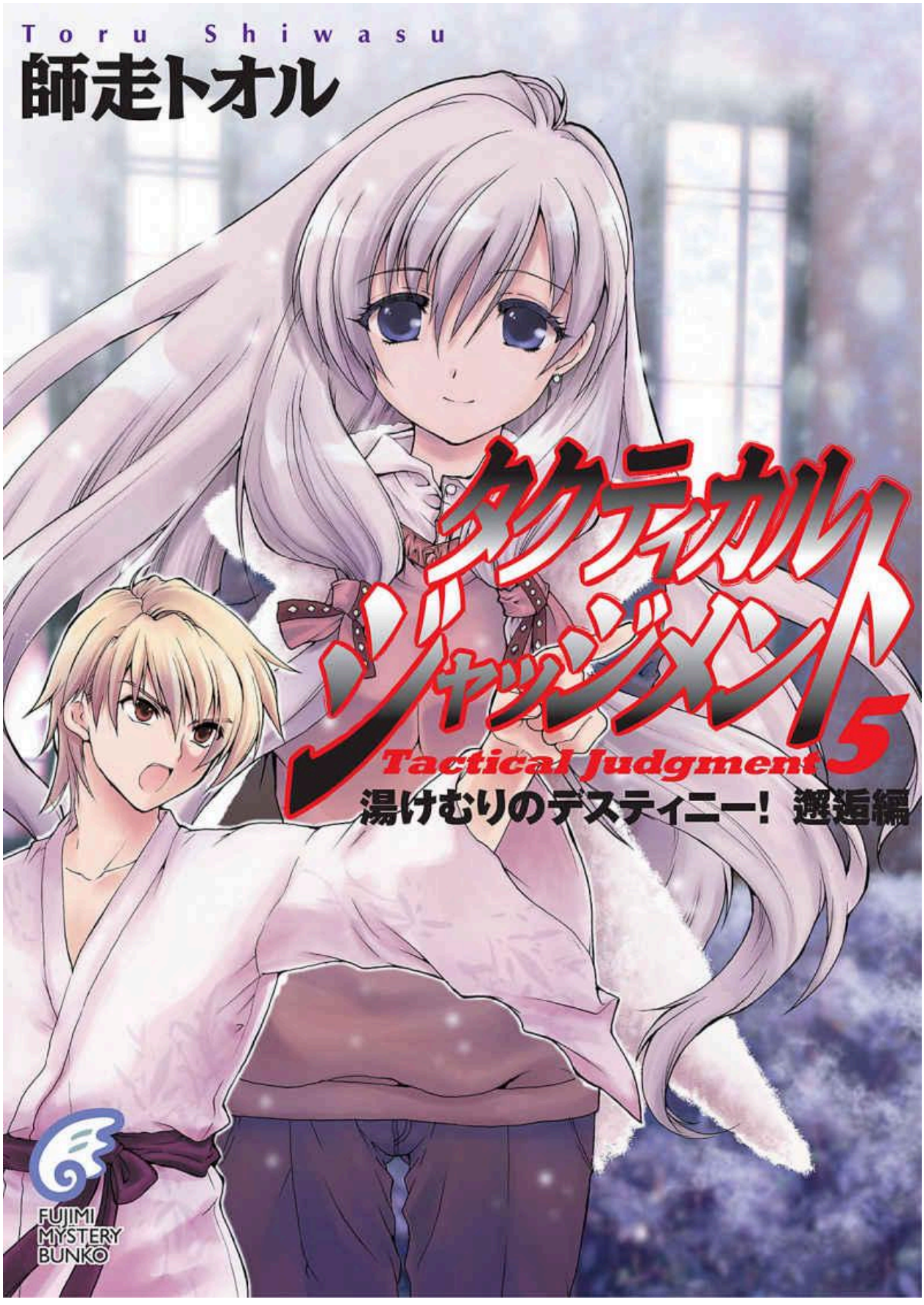
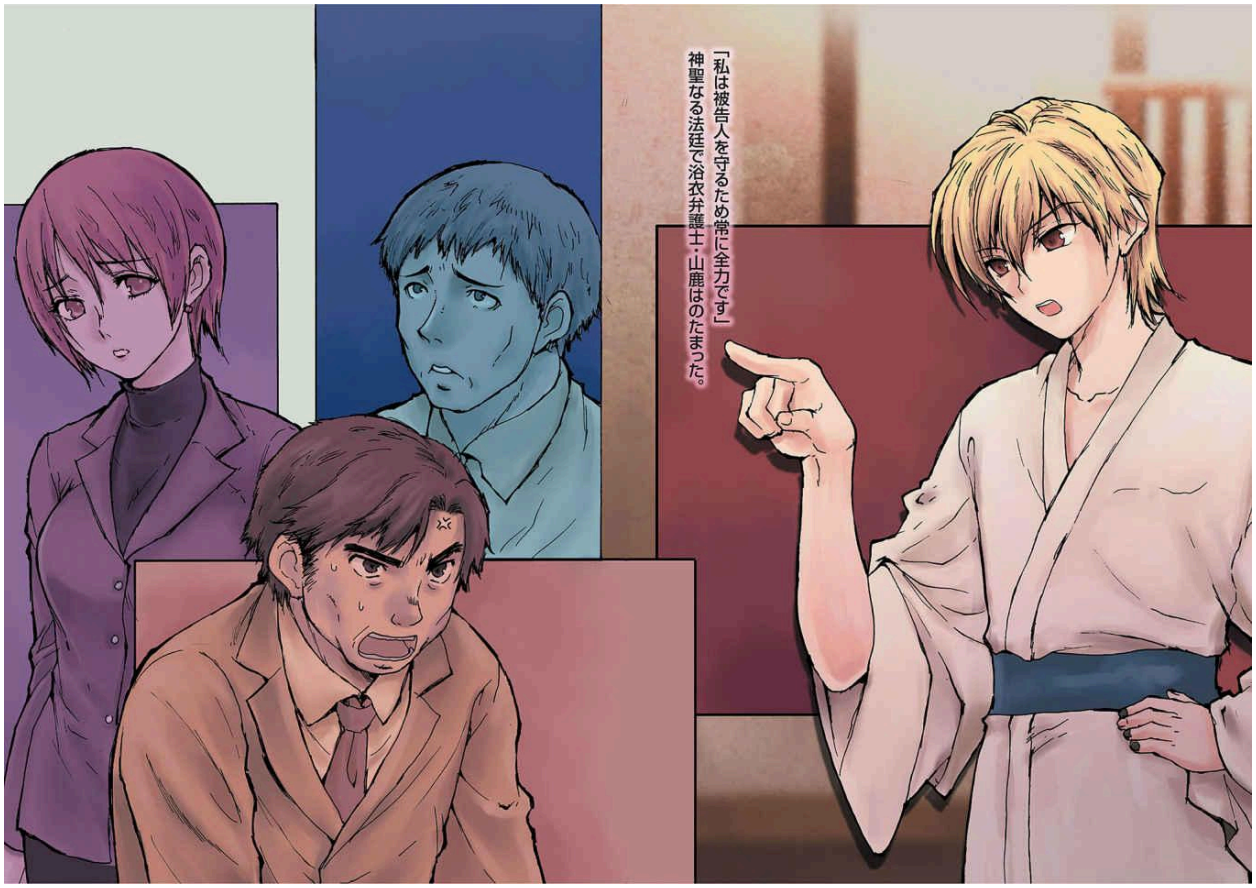

Toru Shiwasu
師走トオル
タクティカル ジャッジメント 5
Tactical Judgment
湯けむりのデスティニー！ 邂逅編
FUJIMI MYSTERY BUNKO

Tactical Judgment


「私は被告人を守るため常に全力です」
神聖なる法廷で浴衣弁護士・山鹿はのたまった。

『待て』
氏神のとんでもないオーダーに
俺と影野の声が見事に唱和した。

Tactical Judgment Vol 5: Steamy Destiny! (Meeting)

By Toru Shiwasu

Translated by waifutime

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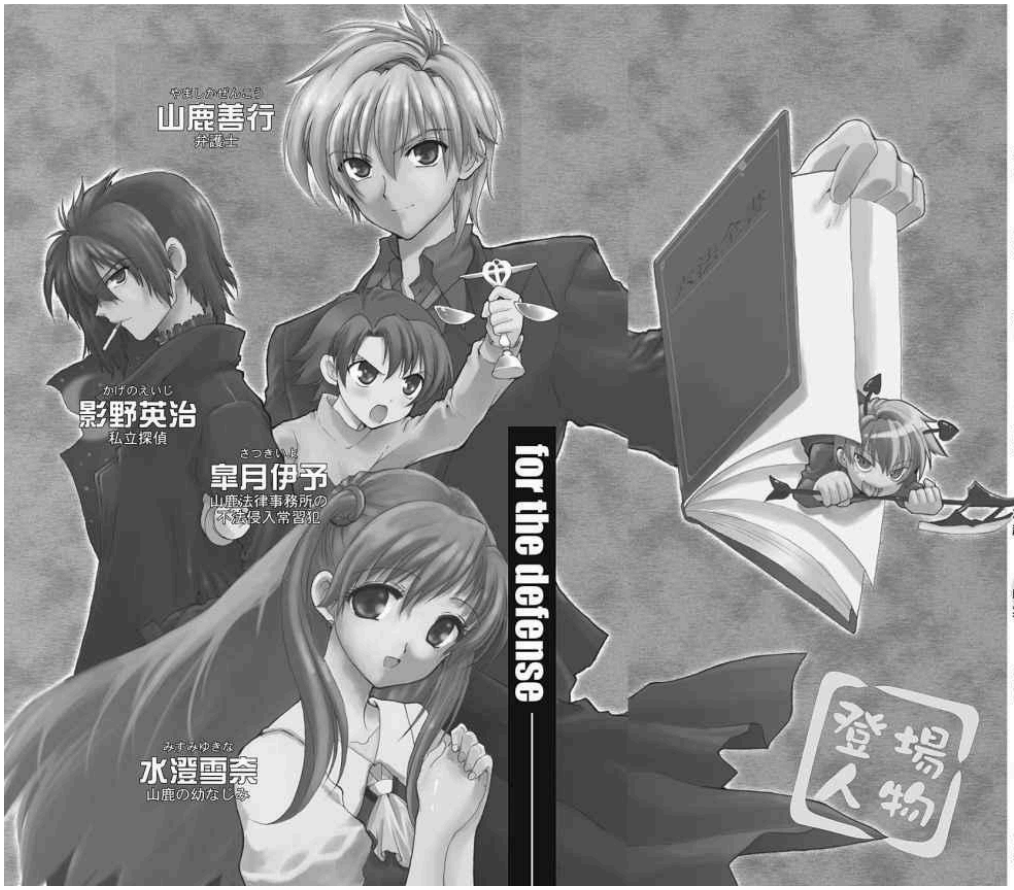


登場人物

for the prosecution

氏神功徳
監察医。かつて山鹿、影野と共にホストリオと……

池上良
今回の裁判長。小太りの中年で腰が低い

滝真
検事。三十代なかば。山鹿とやり合う気はまんまん

guest

一ノ宮昌子
首吊り死体となって発見される。旅館うたかたに宿泊

一ノ宮明之
六年前に再婚した昌子の夫。趣味は魚を飼うこと

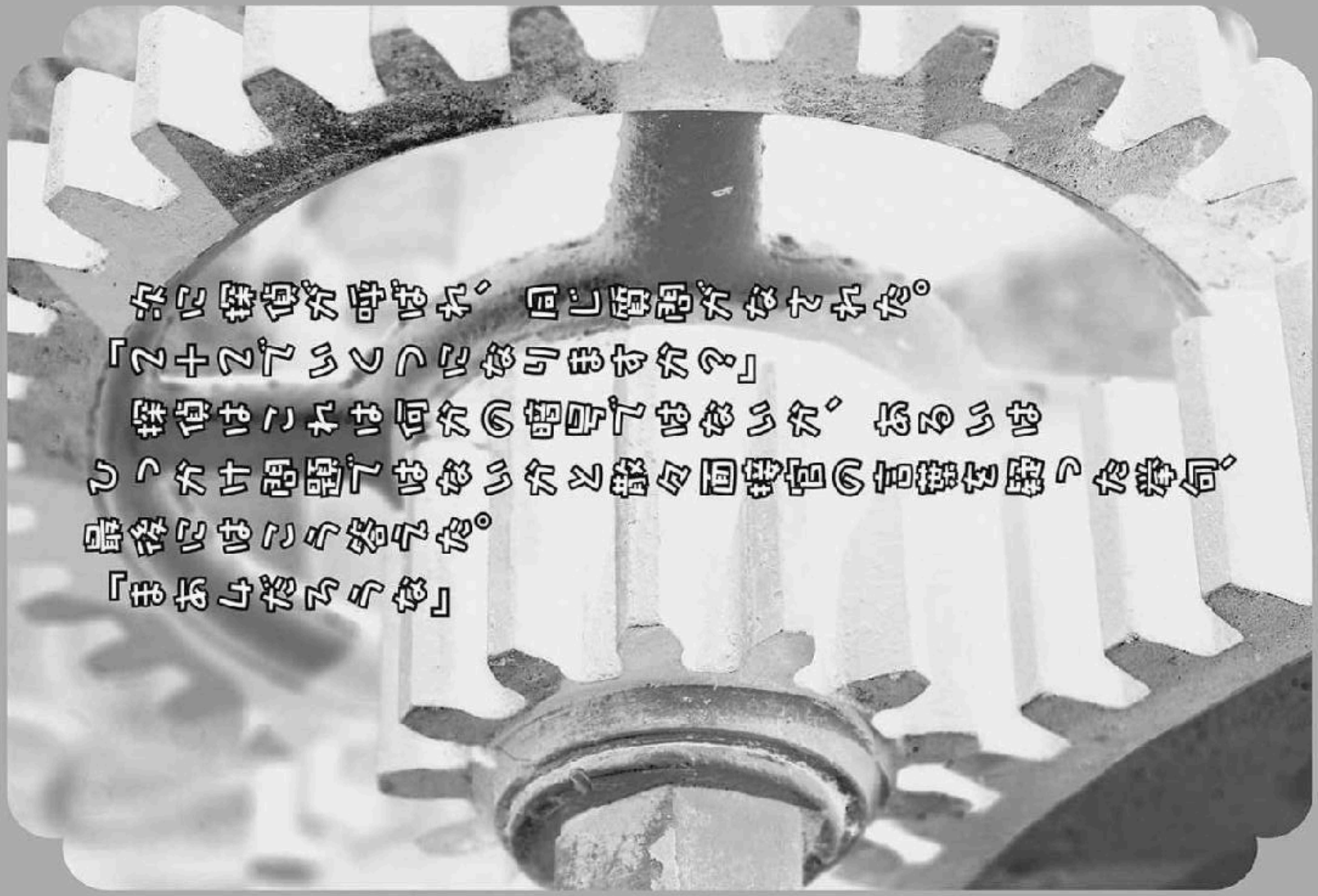
一ノ宮智康
明之の弟。気性は激しいが、実は小心者で放蕩人

二岡浩二
昌子の義理の息子。顔つきは悪いが、人はいいらしい

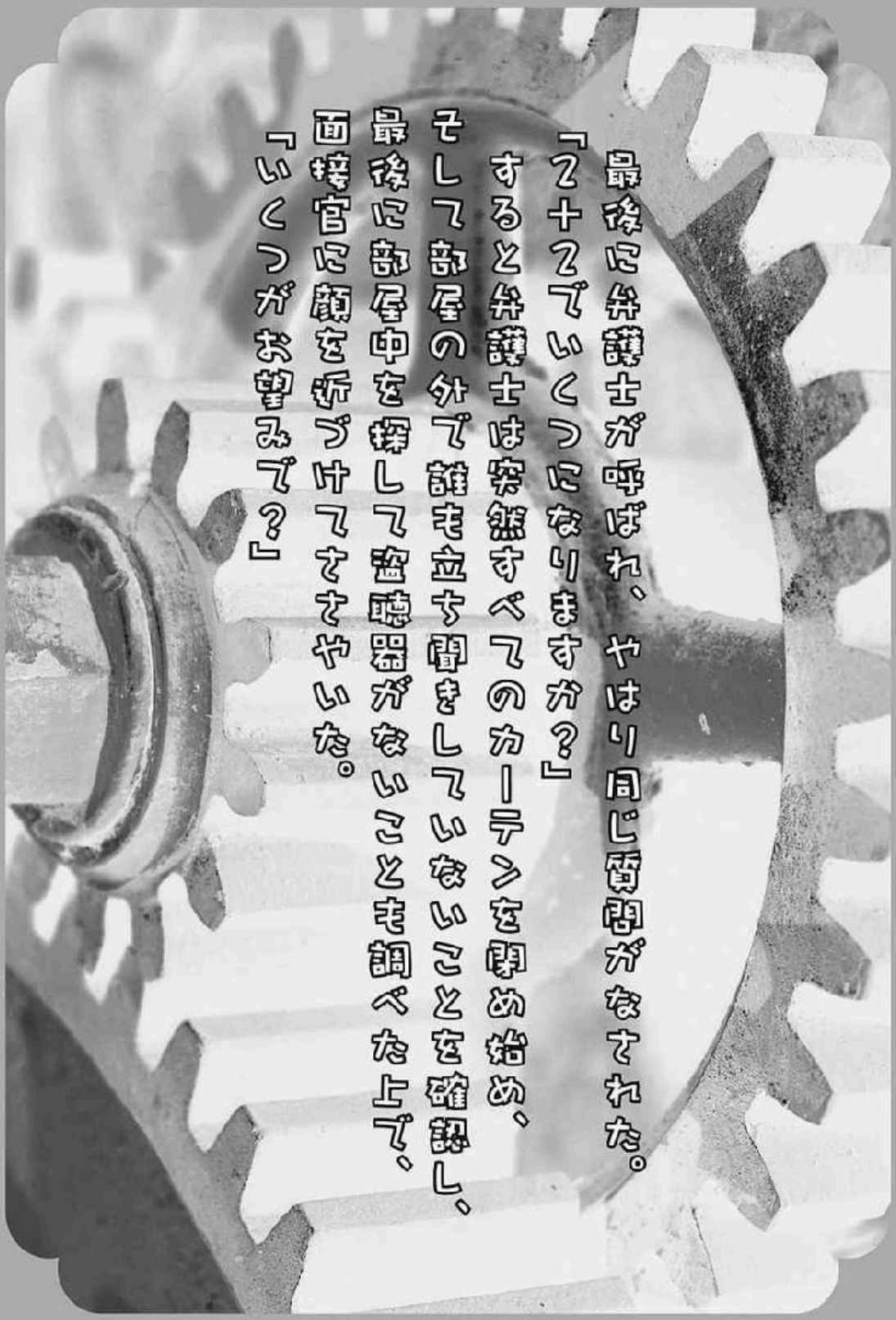
二岡真由
昌子の実の娘。浩二の妻。ファッションデザイナー

葛西昭三
昌子の専属主治医。元は大病院の経営者だった

女子た生と探偵と弁護士が面接を受けることになった。
面接官はまず女子た生を呼び、
「2＋2でいくつになりますか？」
と質問した。彼女は少し戸惑ってから答えた。
「4……じゃないんでしょうか？」



次に珠得が呼ばれ、同じ質問がなされた。
「2＋2でいくつになりますか？」
珠得はこれは何かの暗号ではないが、あるいは
ひっかけ問題ではないかと散々面接官の言葉を聞いた挙句、
最後にはこう答えた。
「まあムだろうな」



最後に弁護士が呼ばれ、やはり同じ質問がなされた。
「2+2でいくつになりますか？」
すると弁護士は突然すべてのカーテンを閉め始め、
そして部屋の外で誰も立ち聞きしていないことを確認し、
最後に部屋中を探して盗聴器がないことも調べた上で、
面接官に顔を近づけてささやいた。
「いくつがお望みで？」

A female college student, a detective, and a lawyer were all scheduled for an interview.
The interviewer first called in the college student and asked her,
“How much does 2+2 equal?”
She hesitated for a moment and then answered,
“4… I guess?”

Next, the detective was called in, and the same question was posed.
“How much does 2+2 equal?”
The detective, suspecting this might be some kind of code or a trick question, doubted the interviewer’s words for a while before finally answering,
“Well, it’s probably 4.”

Finally, the lawyer was called in and was asked the same question.
“How much does 2+2 equal?”
The lawyer suddenly started closing all the curtains, checked to make sure no one was eavesdropping outside the room, and then searched the room to confirm there were no listening devices. After all this, he leaned in close to the interviewer and whispered,
“How much would you like it to be?”

第一章
三人目の男

Chapter 1: The Third Man

December 7th, 2:35 PM, National Highway

As we left the snow country behind, we entered a tunnel.

…Hmm. Something feels off, but since I'm not exactly striving to be a literary figure, I'll just ignore it.

After three hours of driving on the Tohoku Expressway and another thirty minutes of relentless driving, the scenery around us had completely transformed into a snow-covered landscape.

A wide national highway, sparsely dotted with houses in a remote, rural area, likely maintained with an excessive amount of local government grants. My white sedan was driving along this road. As expected in such a countryside, the number of passing cars was extremely low.

"Yukina, do I turn left next?"

Seeing an intersection ahead, I asked Yukina, who was sitting in the passenger seat.

"Um, just a moment."

After staring at the map she held for a few seconds, Yukina replied, "Yes, turn left here. Then, it should be right at the next intersection."

"Got it."

Nice. Really nice. My beloved woman was sitting in the passenger seat of the car I was driving, looking at the map and guiding me. It felt just like a married couple searching for the path they should take together — really nice.

However, at this moment, I wasn't even allowed to indulge in such small happiness.

"Hey, Zenko, aren't we there yet? Stop driving so slowly and step on it!"

A delinquent communist middle schooler who knew nothing of the dangers of snowy roads and kicked the back of my seat while saying whatever she pleased. Her name was Satsuki Iyo.

"Give it up, that's a tall order. The only thing fast about this guy is his tongue."

And then there was her partner in crime, Kageno Eiji, who chimed in from next to her.

"Shut up, you two! We'll be there soon, so just keep quiet!"

I was at my wit's end. I tried to silence them by raising my voice.

But my intensity, which would normally intimidate any witness in court, was completely ineffective against these two, who had long since lost the concept of fear.

"Yeah, the only thing that works properly is his tongue."

"And it's not just one tongue — he's double-tongued, so he's got another one tucked away somewhere. How many times have we heard the 'we'll be there soon' line now?"

"Hey, don't be so mean. Try to imagine Zenko without his two-faced act. He'd be as pure and innocent as the snow piled up outside."

"Well, if you put it that way, at least snow is better since you can have a snowball fight with it."

"…These brats."

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't stay quiet after being insulted like that.

But unfortunately, at this moment, I was driving on an unfamiliar snowy road, and I literally couldn't lift a finger or a foot, nor did I have the mental capacity to come up with a retort. All I could do was let the two of them say whatever they wanted…

However.

"Sorry, you two. We really will be there soon, so just hang in there a little longer," Yukina said in the next instant.

"Okay, if Yukina says so, I guess we have no choice."

"Yeah, you're right."

The two pests backed down easily. If only I'd sprayed some pesticide on them sooner, they might have quieted down even faster, and I lamented my poor preparation.

This trip could have been truly enjoyable for me if it weren't for these two noisy pests…

◆

It all started with a stroke of luck.

Earlier this month, a certain criminal trial I had taken on as a defense attorney had reached a successful conclusion. To celebrate the resolution, we decided to have a small party, and Yukina

and Satsuki, who had gone out shopping for the occasion, ended up winning the grand prize at a shopping district lottery — a two-day, one-night hot spring trip for four.

Let me make it clear — I have no interest in hot springs. None at all. There's no way there'd be a conveniently located mixed-gender hot spring nowadays, and even if there were an open-air bath, there's no way a lawyer could stoop so low as to peek. If someone were caught doing something like that, a teenager might be let off with a night of kneeling in apology, but for a lawyer, who is supposed to be morally upstanding, it would end with my face and name being splashed across national newspapers. I already have plenty of enemies on my tail as soon as I step out of the office, so I can't afford to engage in any risky behavior. In short, there's absolutely nothing I could look forward to at a hot spring.

Of course, it's not like there aren't any mixed-gender hot springs left in the world, and I can't completely rule out the possibility that, due to some supernatural phenomenon, the adjacent bath might come into view...

…Anyway, I didn't want to go to the hot spring, but since work had just calmed down, and more importantly, since Yukina really wanted to go — yes, it was solely because Yukina strongly wished to go that this hot spring trip happened. I repeat, it was not due to any ulterior motives on my part. Absolutely not.

However.

If this had been a trip alone with Yukina, there would have been no complaints. But for some reason, two unnecessary extras decided to tag along.

"Who do you think won that grand prize for you!?"

"When someone's always looking out for you, you should repay the favor at times like this."

I don't even want to explain who said these things.

Of course, I was against the idea of these unnecessary companions joining us.

But everything was decided with a single phrase from Yukina, which, while seemingly full of humanitarian spirit, was nothing short of merciless for me:

"It'll be more fun if we all go together."

◆

The town was nestled beside a large lake in the mountains.

The lake was called "Abuku Lake." The lake itself wasn't particularly warm — it was just a regular lake — but apparently, hot springs bubbled up from the lakebed, which is how it got its name. However, the amount of hot water coming out of the lake was minimal, and by this time of year, the entire lake was covered in thick ice, which, depending on the weather, could even be used for ice skating.

And this town was called "Abuku Town." Considering how "Abuku" means "bubble", it's an easy-to-understand name, but I had to question the taste of whoever named it.

The town wasn't particularly large. According to the guidebook, the population was around two thousand. Still, it was quite famous as a hot spring area, and since it was only a thirty-minute drive from the prefectural capital, it didn't feel rundown at all. New inns and hotels, large buildings presumably, were scattered across the town, with steam rising between them, giving it the atmosphere of a hot spring resort.

The inn we were heading to was quite a grand one, considering it was just a prize in a local shopping district lottery.

"Inn 'Utakata', as in 'transient'…? Sounds like the kind of place that might disappear by morning," Satsuki muttered as she looked at the inn's sign. Well, it was a fitting name for an inn in Abuku Town, I supposed.

The building was a two-story, reinforced concrete structure. It was located a bit further from the center of Abuku Town, and maybe because the land was cheaper, it was quite wide.

The four of us walked through the entrance. On the left was the reception, on the right a souvenir shop, and straight ahead was a hall with sofas and low tables. No, since it's an inn, it should probably be called the parlor or lounge? Anyway, it was a typical Japanese inn layout.

"Welcome to Inn Utakata," a voice called out from the reception.

It wasn't a traditional, beautiful young hostess, but a middle-aged man with a receding hairline.

Not that it matters much to me, since I have Yukina, but from a service standpoint, I felt it might be better if the inn didn't start off with an old man greeting guests.

"May I have your name, please?"

"Ah, Yamashika."

After checking what seemed to be the reservation book, the man nodded and handed me a form and a pen.

"Yes, Mr. Yamashika. We've been expecting you. Please fill out the registration form."

"Sure."

I took the pen and started filling out the necessary information: address, name, occupation, companions, and other required details. In this day and age, leaving personal information in the hands of strangers feels a bit unsettling, but there's no way a lawyer could get away with providing false information. With a resigned sigh, I wrote everything down honestly.

Once I finished, I handed back the pen and the registration form.

As soon as the middle-aged man saw the form I had filled out, his expression changed.

"Uh, excuse me, but… are you perhaps the lawyer, Mr. Yamashika? The one who recently won a not-guilty verdict in court…?"

He looked at me with a mix of surprise and respect.

"Well, I'm probably the only lawyer around with a weird name like Yamashika."

"Oh, I knew it! Excuse me for not introducing myself earlier; I'm the owner of this inn, Kotaro Igarashi."

"Really? The owner himself greeting guests?"

"Yes, the staff here are excellent, but I'm a bit of a worrywart. I just can't be satisfied unless I greet the guests myself.

But wow, it's such an honor to have you staying with us, Mr. Yamashika. I always follow your cases with great interest."

"Well, thank you."

"Your last trial was amazing. Actually, the one before that was incredible too. Reading about your cases in the newspaper has become one of my recent pleasures."

"Oh, those cases weren't really that big a deal to me. But hey, if you ever find yourself caught up in a murder case, feel free to give me a call."

"Oh, if I could have your help, I'd be invincible! I could handle anything, even robbery or murder! Ha-ha-ha!"

"…Hahaha."

It seemed like just a polite exchange, but something about it felt off.

Honestly, being told I have a fan by a middle-aged guy with a thinning, barcode-like hairline doesn't make me particularly happy. Still, witnessing this display maybe could get those two pests who never show me any respect to at least reevaluate me a bit. And of course, it would definitely raise my points with Yukina as well.

(Hmph, did you see that? Did you hear that?)

Feeling a bit proud, I turned to face the three behind me.

"Hey, Yukina, look at this! They've got Abuku Buns and Abuku Crackers!"

"Oh, you're right. They always have these kinds of things."

"They sound like they'd disappear before you could even eat them."

…All three of them were already browsing the souvenir shop.

◆

The room we were shown to was, by all accounts, a very generic, typical room you'd find at any inn.

Room 203 on the second floor. Facing east. The window offered a view of the inn's garden and the snow-covered mountains, which was decent enough.

The floor, as expected, was covered in tatami mats, and the room was like a small living room in size. In one corner, there was a TV, a safe, a refrigerator, and a unit bath. It was the epitome of a typical Japanese inn. The only thing that stood out was the Western-style bathroom.

Now then.

When you check into a Japanese inn, the first thing you do is pretty much always the same. It goes without saying: you change into a yukata.

Yukata are wonderful.

The white nape of a woman's neck peeking out from the collar. The glimpse of her white feet beneath the hem.

On top of that, they're easy to take off and easy to slip your hands into. You can even do it without taking them off. "Do what?" I don't want to waste time explaining to kids who would ask that kind of question. Just thinking about Yukina in a yukata is enough to make me feel satisfied, let alone imagining her changing into one.

But still.

Never before have I cursed my fate as much as I did today. A rare overnight trip, the perfect opportunity to see Yukina in a yukata.

And yet. Despite all that —

"Why the hell am I sharing a room with you, you damn Kageno?!"

"How the hell should I know, idiot?"

Kageno responded in an exasperated voice while tying his sash.

Yes. For some reason, the room we were shown to was a Japanese-style twin room. And for some reason, my roommate was Kageno. Yukina, on the other hand, was beyond the thick soundproof walls.

…Life is full of injustices, I think. Good people die young, while bad people thrive in the world. While unfortunate, starving children die of hunger every day, in developed countries, mountains of leftovers are wasted daily. No matter how hard we defense attorneys work, the unfortunate people wrongly accused of crimes will never disappear.

Taking all that into account, I want to state this with all my might. First of all, I'm pretty sure the prize for this lottery was "a hot spring trip for four." It's a shopping district lottery, after all. If it's for four people, it's only natural to assume they intended it for a family of four. And yet.

And yet, why the hell did that damn shopping district give us two twin rooms instead of a four-person room?

Even if I accept the unfortunate reality that we got two twin rooms, there wouldn't be any problem if I were sharing a room with Yukina. But when it came time to decide the room assignments, Yukina quickly entered a room with that brat, as if it had been prearranged.

Well, sure, if Yukina and I shared a room, it would mean Kageno and Satsuki would have to spend the night together in the other room.

I know Kageno isn't into anything weird, but if word got out that a middle schooler spent the night in the same room as an adult man with no blood relation, who knows what people would say.

Sure, I'd have a good laugh if Kageno got caught for some kind of indecent act or violation of a minor protection law and ended up with his face and name in the newspaper. But if it came out

that I, a lawyer, was present, it would be very bad. I already have lots of enemies, and it wouldn't be the first time I've been falsely accused of being an unethical lawyer.

So, with great reluctance, I had no choice but to accept the reality of sharing a room with Kageno.

Just then, I heard a loud banging on the door.

There's only one person I know who'd knock like that. Sure enough, without waiting for a response, Satsuki, already changed into her yukata, barged into the room.

"What are you two doing holed up in your room? Let's get to the hot spring already!"

"…Yeah, yeah."

Hoping to finally catch a glimpse of Yukina in her yukata, I mustered up the strength to grab a towel and left the room.

◆

My final hope was rewarded.

"Oh, Mr. Zenko. Let's hurry to the hot spring."

Yukina smiled at me, wearing her yukata.

The white nape of her neck peeking out from the collar. The white feet peeking out from the hem. And to add one more thing, the unexpected fullness in her chest that her usual clothes didn't reveal. It seems she's the type to look slimmer in clothes.

The yukata she was wearing wasn't particularly beautiful. It was a plain one with just a black pattern on a white background.

Still, the impression it gives can change drastically depending on who's wearing it. Yukina was a perfect example of that.

"M-Mr. Zenko, please don't stare at me like that."

Noticing my gaze, Yukina looked down, slightly uncomfortable.

"No, it's fine. That yukata looks great on you."

"T-Thank you…"

I’m not some inexperienced virgin who doesn’t know how to handle women. If I put my mind to it, I can say something like that with ease.

But maybe Yukina isn’t used to compliments like that, because her cheeks turned red, and she looked down.

Nice. This atmosphere is really nice. If I could just throw in one or two more compliments, maybe Yukina would start to feel the same way.

But life is never that kind.

"What are you doing, Yukina? Let’s go to the hot spring already!"

"Huh? Oh… okay."

Yukina didn’t even have time to hesitate. Satsuki, who had come up behind her, grabbed Yukina’s arm and quickly led her away.

"What are you waiting for, Zenko? Let’s go too."

And the only one left by my side was this expressionless, unrefined guy.

...From the moment the trip for four was decided, I had a faint feeling.

Maybe this time, it would be nothing but a series of close encounters that stop just short...

◆

This inn had all the hallmarks of a typical Japanese inn. The entrance was like that, and so were the rooms.

And according to the information I had looked up in advance, even the bathhouse we were heading to was no exception. It was the kind of standard bathhouse you’d find at any hot spring inn, with an indoor bath connected to an outdoor open-air bath.

I’ve said it many times before, but I have absolutely no interest in hot springs. Knowing that it wasn’t a mixed bath only makes it worse. Sure, I understand that hot springs are supposed to be better for your health than a regular bath, but I’m confident in my health without relying on such things. A normal shower is more than enough for me.

The same goes for the open-air bath. Whether a bath is indoors or outdoors doesn’t matter as long as you can get in. In fact, just hearing the words "outdoor bath" gives me nothing but negative images like catching a cold or poor hygiene.

Of course, I'm not entirely uninterested in the additional value of an open-air bath — namely, the sense of openness —, but as a lawyer bound by the law, that value holds little meaning if I cannot act on it.

At this point, the only thing that could console me was the thought of seeing Yukina after she got out of the bath… but when I think about it, that's a pretty low-level consolation. I'm not supposed to be some hormone-driven high school student.

So it was only natural that my steps towards the bathhouse felt as reluctant as a defense attorney heading into a trial where his client was about to plead guilty.

However.

On the way to the bathhouse, something happened.

"Waaah! Waaah!" I heard the cry of a baby, loud and clear.

Looking ahead, I saw a man and woman, presumably a couple, heading towards the bathhouse like us. The baby's cry was coming from the man. He was probably holding the baby in his arms.

Even so, the man was absurdly tall. Taller than both Kageno and me. He didn't seem like he had a particularly burly build, but he gave off a rather stocky impression.

As for the woman, judging from her back, she looked to be around twenty-five or twenty-six. Her long, wavy black hair was quite striking.

"Damn it, why does she start crying as soon as I hold her?"

The moment I heard the man's voice — I exchanged glances with Kageno.

"Hey, Kageno. I hope I'm just hearing things, but doesn't that voice sound familiar?"

"...Yeah. I hate to say it, but I got the same feeling."

Kageno's face looked a bit pale. I might have been making a similar face at that moment.

"Oh dear, Kudoku, you have to be gentler with a girl," the woman, who seemed to be his wife, said as she took the baby from him. The baby's crying immediately stopped.

'Kudoku'. As in "acts of charity". There was only one person who came to mind when I thought of a ridiculously tall man with such a ridiculous name.

"No way… Ujigami?"

The proper name slipped out of my mouth unconsciously.

The response came right away. The couple turned to look at us.

The woman was someone I didn’t know. She looked puzzled, as if she had no idea who we were.

But the other one — the tall man —

"Ugh."

The moment he saw us, his face showed genuine displeasure.

You couldn’t tell from behind, but the man was wearing glasses. Just like two years ago.

"Mr. Zenko, is that someone you know?" Yukina asked, tilting her head.

"...Yeah. From a while back."

"Kudoku, do you know these people?" the woman with Ujigami asked the same question.

However,

"No, you’ve got the wrong guy. Let’s go," the man called Kudoku said, trying to pretend he hadn’t seen anything.

There was no doubt about it now. That tone, that attitude — it was definitely Kudoku Ujigami.

"Oh, Kudoku, you can’t just ignore them if they’re people you know," the woman said, seeing through Ujigami’s obvious lie. She tugged on his arm, bringing him over to us.

Kudoku Ujigami.

With his glasses on, his face might seem somewhat intellectual, depending on how you looked at it, but they didn’t hide his naturally sharp eyes. And he was even bigger than both Kageno and me.

"It is you, Ujigami, isn’t it?" Kageno said, as if to confirm.

Ujigami clicked his tongue softly before reluctantly opening his mouth.

"Yeah. I never expected to run into you guys in a place like this. Long time no see, Kageno. And Yamashika too."

"...Y-Yeah."

The reunion was so abrupt that even I couldn't help but feel a bit shaken.

Satsuki, who usually butts into situations like this, remained silent this time, perhaps sensing the tension in the air.

Just as an uncomfortable silence was about to take over,

"Hello, everyone," Ujigami's female companion said with a bright smile.

She wore a cross pendant on her chest. Holding a baby with an innocent expression in her arms and smiling softly, she looked like a saint. How could such a woman be with a man as wicked and immoral as Ujigami? And whose child was that baby, anyway?

Noticing that we were dressed to head to the bath, the woman said,

"It seems you're acquaintances with my husband. I'm sure you have a lot to catch up on, so rather than standing around here, why don't we all head to the hot spring together?"

At that point in time, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable proposition.

◆

"...It's a bit hot."

"Idiot, it's just right like this."

We were in the outdoor open-air bath. Ujigami replied to my comment about the water temperature in a tone that made him sound like an old Edo native. The glasses gave him an oddly intellectual look, which didn't quite match his rough manner of speaking.

The outdoor bath, filled with the smell of sulfur and rising steam, was much larger than I had imagined.

I was fortunate that there weren't many people here before us. Being seen with a group of guys who look this shady might lead others to mistakenly think I'm one of them.

Night had already begun to fall. According to the guidebook, the open-air bath was famous for allowing you to soak while watching snowflakes drift down, but unfortunately, the weather was clear, and there was no snow.

"Still, I never thought I'd run into you guys here," Ujigami said, sounding reflective.

"You and me both. What are you doing here anyway?"

"What, you saying I can't enjoy a hot spring? I won this trip in a lottery at the local shopping district, believe it or not."

"So, the same as us," Kageno chimed in.

"Oh, so you guys won the same lottery? Well, that explains it."

Indeed, the chances of running into someone you know at one of the countless hot spring inns outside the prefecture, and on the same day no less, seemed extremely low.

But when I thought about it, even though we hadn't seen each other in a while, Ujigami lived in the same town as us. The odds of both of us winning the top prize in the same lottery were... very low, but not impossible.

"But how many years has it been since we last saw each other? Two years now?"

"Yeah, something like that. ...Damn, I guess glasses don't work in a place like this," Ujigami said, shrugging as he responded to Kageno's question. Then he took off his glasses, which had become completely fogged up. With the glasses gone, the slight intellectual air they gave him disappeared, leaving only his intimidating features.

But still, two years, huh? Time really flies.

Kudoku Ujigami. He's two years older than me, so he's one year older than Kageno. I think we first met at a group date during university. Looking back, it seems a bit odd to have met a guy at a group date.

At that time, this guy was a medical student. While I was a budding lawyer, he was a budding doctor.

Doctors, like lawyers, are considered elite professionals. As he sped down the elite path, the glasses he wore made him look every bit the honor student to those around him.

However, for some reason, he got along better with me and Kageno than with any women around. So, the three of us would often hit the town at night and get up to all sorts of things.

...I don't really want to remember exactly what we did. Let's just say they were the kinds of mistakes you make when you're young. That's also when people started calling us the "Host Trio" — a stupid nickname, really.

But as a medical student, his workload got heavier with each passing year, and at some point, he suddenly stopped hanging out with us. Both Kageno and I have a motto: "Don't reject those

who come, and don't chase after those who leave." So for two years, we didn't call each other, not even once...

Two years may seem short, but it's a long time nonetheless. I don't know much about the exams doctors have to take, but after two years, he should have become a doctor by now.

"Well… Honestly, there's a lot to catch up on, but where should I even start?" Ujigami said.

"What are you talking about?" Kageno immediately shot back.

"The first thing you need to explain is about that woman and the baby. Who are they?"

Right. It was impossible not to be curious. After all, after two years of not seeing a former acquaintance, you meet them again, and suddenly there's a woman and a baby by their side.

"Take a guess. That's obviously my wife and daughter."

"…"

"…"

Kageno and I naturally fell silent.

Well, to be fair, we had already sensed it from the conversation earlier. But hearing it directly from him made it all the more jarring.

"What's wrong with you two? Why are you suddenly quiet? Is it really so strange that I'd have a family?"

"Yeah, it's strange as hell."

"That's right. I'd sooner believe you've started a new kind of marriage scam."

Kageno and I took turns saying this. Ujigami glared at us with a slightly exasperated expression.

"…Honestly, you guys haven't changed a bit."

"But still, you with a daughter? So, you messed up and had to get married, huh?"

I asked with a smirk. After all, Ujigami had the same looks as two years ago. He was popular with women and, in fact, had been involved with several. The only reason a player like him would be forced into marriage, the so-called graveyard of life, would be because of a shotgun wedding.

“Hmm, it’s true she got pregnant before we got married. But let me make one thing clear: Satori and I decided to do it this way from the start.”

So, that woman’s name is Satori, huh?

But it’s a strange thing to say — getting married after conceiving a child. That’s definitely not the usual order of things.

My skepticism grew, but I decided not to press him on how they ended up with that result.

That’s because Ujigami had a distant look in his eye, coupled with a faint grin. Grinning when it comes to something related to a woman — if I started asking questions, I’d undoubtedly be treated to some kind of bragging. There are six billion people in this world, but the last thing I ever want to hear from either Ujigami or Kageno is them bragging about their love lives. It’s fine when I do it, though.

“Anyway, can I ask you something now?”

Ujigami snapped out of his grin and turned to me.

“…What is it?”

“Don’t just ‘what is it’ me. What’s the deal with your group? I’m not surprised you guys are here with women. But one of those girls looked no older than a middle schooler. When did you start developing that kind of taste?”

…Well, to be fair, with two guys and two girls, it’s not unreasonable for him to have that kind of suspicion.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. We’ve got our circumstances, but at the very least, it’s not anything like what you’re imagining. That kid is just a habitual trespasser in my office.”

“Huh?”

Ujigami frowned in confusion, but I decided not to bother explaining any further.

“She’s the one who won the hot spring trip in the lottery. We didn’t want to, but we had no choice but to bring her along.”

However, maybe because he didn’t want Ujigami to get the wrong idea, Kageno, unusually for him, chimed in to back up my explanation.

“…I’m still not sure I get it, but fine. At the very least, I can’t imagine you guys getting into that kind of stuff.

But what about the other girl, the pretty one? What's her deal?"

"Oh, she's mine. Don't even think about hitting on her."

I made sure to say that.

"Oh, she's yours, is she? But you two don't really seem like a match. She's way too pure for a filthy beast like you."

"Hmph, like you're one to talk. What about the woman with you? She looks like she's got a halo shining around her."

"I was curious about that, too," said Kageno. "How did you end up with a woman like that? Did you use your status as a doctor to lure her in?"

Ujigami didn't even pretend to be offended.

"Hmm. Actually, saying she has a halo isn't too far off. She's a Christian and used to be a nun. What was it again? Garlic or something?"

"…You mean 'Catholic'?" Kageno asked.

"Yeah, that's the one, Catholic."

I see, now that I think about it, she was wearing a cross around her neck. And now that he mentioned it, her demeanor did have a certain nun-like air to it. Still, you should at least remember your own wife's religion. Garlic, seriously?

"But let me tell you this. It's true I got my medical license, but I ended up in a field that doesn't pay very well. So, I've never once used my status as a doctor to seduce a woman."

Kageno gave him a puzzled look.

"Really? I thought being a doctor was supposed to be one of the most lucrative professions."

"Well, at least the path I chose isn't like that. I'm a public servant, so I won't starve, but that's about it."

"A-A public servant?"

I couldn't help but ask.

You don't hear much about doctors who are public servants.

“What kind of doctor are you, anyway? Are you in the Self-Defense Forces or something?”

“Nope. I’m a medical examiner.”

“A-A medical examiner!?”

A medical examiner — a doctor who performs autopsies. Well, yeah, I guess that makes you a public servant.

But the fact that this guy became a medical examiner…

“I see. It’s surprising, but it makes sense. You really do seem more suited to dealing with dead bodies than living people.”

“Yeah, I think so too. Dead bodies don’t complain if you’re a little rough with them.”

That’s not something a doctor should say.

“But that makes it even more surprising that you ended up with a woman like that. A saintly woman marrying a guy who specializes in digging up corpses, of all things.”

“…Yeah, she might be too good for me,” Ujigami said, unusually humble in response to Kageno’s words. But with that faraway look in his eyes, it still sounded like he was bragging.

Just then, a scream echoed from the bath next door.

“Hey!”

“Kyah! Hey, Iyo, where do you think you’re touching!”

Satsuki’s voice was followed by Yukina’s scream, which rang out around us. I strained my ears to make out what was going on and heard Satsuki muttering.

“Wow, Yukina, you really do hide your figure well under those clothes… I’m so jealous.”

I couldn’t help but glance at the bamboo wall separating heaven and hell. It made me sad to realize that, for just a moment, I was jealous of that brat Satsuki.

On the other side of that bamboo wall lay a paradise full of angels. The wall was thin. If I wanted to, I could easily find a gap or even climb over it. But as it stands now, I’m not allowed to cross even the smallest of barriers. Ah, this must be what it means to grow up.

And now, standing right in front of me are two scruffy guys — Kageno and Ujigami. There's nothing fun about getting into a bath with them.

I imagine what it might be like. The things I could infer from Satsuki's voice earlier would certainly make for a picturesque scene if it were between women. But if it were between men…

"Take that!"

"Whoa!? What the hell are you doing, Ujigami?"

"Hmph, Kageno. You've really bulked up your chest, haven't you?"

"…"

I couldn't help but cradle my head in my hands in the bath. I hated myself for even imagining it for a moment.

"What's up with Yamashika? He suddenly looks all gloomy."

"Leave him be. He's been like that ever since we got to this hot spring."

I didn't have the energy to argue.

Somehow, I managed to pull myself together — only to find Ujigami grinning with a sly smile for some reason.

"But that girl's got a great body, doesn't she? So, Yamashika, as someone who's actually seen her, what do you think?"

He said this while nudging me with his elbow. What is he, some old man? …No, I guess he's actually become a father now.

"Shut up. Keep your mouth shut, you married man."

I tried to hide my inner turmoil as I snapped back at him.

However,

"Hey, don't pretend, Yamashika," Kageno interjected unnecessarily.

"Ujigami, just so you know, this guy has no idea. After all, he hasn't even —"

"Kageno! Stop! Don't say anything unnecessary!"

But Kageno had never once listened to my pleas, and this time was no different.

“—He hasn’t even properly held hands with that girl yet.”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaatt?!?!”

Ujigami’s scream echoed throughout the open-air bath.

“What did you say?! This guy, who used to prowl the red-light district Kabukicho every night, who’s had women by the dozen, who was called the ‘Ladies’ Killer,’ hasn’t even held hands with this one girl?!”

“H-Hey, keep it down! They’ll hear us next door!”

I hurriedly dunked Ujigami’s head into the water.

I even considered turning this into an open-air bath murder case, but Ujigami calmly brushed my arm aside and raised his head out of the water. Then, as if nothing had happened, he continued with a dumbfounded look on his face.

“I can’t believe it… What kind of change of heart are we talking about? Did you hit your head or something? Or did some important part of your body stop functioning? If that’s the case, then I can understand.

Hey, don’t be so secretive, Yamashika. I’m a guy too, you know. I’ve never experienced that kind of suffering, but I can imagine it. I’m still technically a licensed doctor, so as an old friend, I’ll give you a checkup.”

With that, Ujigami inexplicably lowered his gaze toward my lower body —

“You idiot!!!”

I unleashed a roundhouse kick from the bath. It should’ve caught him by surprise, but Ujigami dodged it with an impressive backstep.

From the moment I realized I’d be getting into a bath with two other guys, I had a feeling this might happen.

Maybe this whole trip is going to be nothing but this kind of nonsense…

“Hey, you guys. You’ve been noisy for a while now. Can’t you be a little quieter?”

I turned around at the irritated voice to see a man somewhere between middle-aged and elderly glaring at me with a displeased look. He seemed like a pretty rough character at first glance.

Well, it's true that shouting and kicking in a public bath is a nuisance.

But this time, the timing was just bad.

"Huh? You say something, old man? If you've got something to say, come over here and say it loud and clear. I'll listen to whatever you've got to say."

I glared at him as if he were a prosecutor.

It was an outrageous outburst, even for me. But this time, I was in a particularly foul mood. If this turned into a fight, it might actually be a good way to blow off some steam — so I provocatively beckoned him with my hand.

"…Tch."

But it turned out the guy wasn't as tough as he looked. He clicked his tongue and awkwardly slunk back into the indoor bath.

"Pfft, what a spineless guy."

"...Hey, Kageno. Is this guy part of some gang now or something?"

"No. It might be hard to believe, but he's working as a lawyer."

"Oh, in that case, it's no different from being a yakuza. His behavior makes perfect sense now."

...All of you, shut up.

"Well, anyway, staying in the bath too long will make you dizzy," Ujigami suddenly said as he stood up.

"Hey, you two, it's time to get out. Come with me for a bit."

"Huh? What are you going to make us do out here?" I asked, and Ujigami grinned wickedly.

"It's been two years since we last saw each other. To deepen our bond, why don't the three of us scrub each other's backs in a circle?"

"No way in hell."

In an extremely rare moment, Kageno and I spoke in perfect unison.

◆

By the time we got out of the bath, it was already past 5:30 PM.

In front of the dressing room, there was a small waiting area. Or should I call it a lounge?

Of course, there were massage chairs, and several vending machines lined up, ready to take coins from the customers after their bath.

There were even tables for ping-pong and air hockey. I guess the idea was to work up a sweat before getting into the bath? I can't imagine there are people who would want to sweat again after getting out of the bath.

But still.

"Women's baths sure do take a long time. Hey, Kageno, how about a game to kill time?"

Ujigami, having downed a bottle of coffee milk, shamelessly suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous. Why would I want to sweat again after getting out of the bath?"

Kageno responded sensibly.

"Tch, coward. Fine, Yamashika, you're up. Let's work off the frustration we built up in the bath."

"Sorry, but I'm with Kageno on this one. I'm not doing it."

But Ujigami just grinned when he heard my answer. His expression made me want to punch him.

"Yamashika. Since when did you start thinking like Kageno?"

"Shut up. It just so happens that I agree with Kageno this time."

"Liar. You've always been the type of guy who's contrary just for the sake of it. There's no way you'd agree with another contrarian like Kageno. Oh, I get it — you're—"

He grinned even more wickedly.

"—Afraid of losing, aren't you?"

"Fine! Bring it on! Don't come crying to me later!!"

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Zenko.”

…The girls finally came out of the women’s bath thirty minutes later. Ujigami’s wife was with them, too.

Yukina’s appearance in a yukata, fresh from the bath, was breathtaking. I won’t deny it — call me shallow if you want — but this was the moment I’d been looking forward to when I came to this inn.

Her cheeks were slightly flushed from the heat of the hot spring, and her hair was slightly damp, which only seemed to enhance her allure. Especially the view of her nape and collarbone peeking out from her collar — it was indescribably captivating. The phrase “a dripping wet beauty” was made for moments like this… Or was that for men? Whatever, it doesn’t matter.

Incidentally, Ujigami’s wife also exuded a different, more mature charm compared to Yukina, and she was quite attractive. If this had been three years ago, I might have even tried to strike up a conversation.

However, the more I looked at her, the more I couldn’t believe that she was really Ujigami’s wife. How in the world did he manage to pick up a woman like her? I seriously started to suspect that there was something criminal going on. Knowing Ujigami, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d found a way to make some kind of love potion.

Just then, Satsuki, who was utterly lacking in the sex appeal of the other two, toddled over to me with a curious expression on her face.

“Hey, Zenko. You were in the hot spring, right? So why are you sweating so much?”

“Oh, Kudoku, you too?”

Ujigami’s wife, who was holding their baby, tilted her head in confusion.

“It was just a bit of exercise before our grand dinner. Right, Yamashika?”

“Y-Yeah.”

I had no choice but to nod.

In the end, the match kind of fizzled out because neither of us could figure out how to keep score.

At the very least, I reaffirmed that nothing good ever happens when I’m around Ujigami.

◆

Evening. It was time for dinner, one of the highlights of the trip.

“Yukina, could you pass me the soy sauce?”

“Sure, here you go.”

As she handed it to me, our hands touched, and Yukina gasped softly, “Ah…”

Our eyes met, silence followed, the mood rose, and then the following was omitted...

…When Yukina suggested, “Let’s go to the hot spring,” I can’t deny that for a brief moment, an image like this crossed my mind.

And even after I realized that two unwelcome tagalongs would be joining us on our trip, I can’t deny that I still held onto a small hope that some divine intervention would cause those two to get heatstroke and be bedridden.

But fate was as cruel as ever, and reality was just as harsh.

“Hey, Kageno, stop eating all the sashimi! That’s supposed to be for someone like me who’s still growing!”

“Shut up. If you’re still growing, just eat a bunch of vegetables for the nutrition.”

“Hmph…”

“Has your child already weaned?”

“Yes, she’s already eating solid food.”

“Ah, you ate another piece of tuna! Fine, whatever. I’m taking all the rest for myself!”

“You little… Who the hell takes the whole plate?! I haven’t had sashimi in months!”

“…”

“What’s wrong, Yamashika? Why are you spacing out?”

Ujigami poured beer into my glass.

“…I’m just moved. It’s been a while since I’ve had such a lively meal.”

I almost felt like I was going to cry.

“Well, well. I’m surprised you still have emotions that can be moved.”

“Shut up.”

I muttered as I took a sip from my glass.

This was mine and Kageno’s room.

“Why don’t we all eat together? It’s more fun with everyone.”

“Yes, I agree!”

With Ujigami’s wife’s suggestion and Yukina’s immediate response, it was quickly decided that dinner for six would be brought to this room.

The table in the middle of the room was laden with a large platter of sashimi, a hot pot with simmering wild vegetables and local chicken, and various other Japanese dishes filling every available space. Why is it that no matter which inn you go to, even one in the mountains, they always serve sashimi?

Incidentally, before the meal, we all had to follow the Ujigami family tradition and pray to a god that none of us actually believed in. Watching Ujigami and Kageno clasp their hands together in prayer brought a smile to my face.

As for the taste of the food, well, considering it was free, I had no complaints. But I couldn’t accept the fact that my seat was at the far end of the table, with Ujigami to my right, Kageno, and Satsuki in front of me. This setup made it impossible to even brush hands with Yukina, let alone have a proper conversation.

But then again, when I think about it, Yukina and I often have meals together, just the two of us. It’s not uncommon for us to be alone together, so even if we could eat together here, it might not have led to anything significant…

In fact, when Yukina and I have dinner together, it's just the two of us, late at night, in my office, with the bed right next to us.

Given that situation, Yukina should at least be somewhat conscious of it. But she always seems to enjoy our meals together, yet nothing ever progresses beyond that.

In the past, if this were the old me, as Ujigami mentioned in the open-air bath, I would have taken the initiative, even if it meant being a little forceful.

But in Yukina's case, considering the circumstances of our reunion six months ago and her personality, I feel like a forceful approach wouldn't work. So I'm waiting for Yukina to at least show some interest… but unfortunately, there's been no sign of that so far.

Or maybe Yukina wants to maintain this comfortable distance between us for the time being. If anything, I'd prefer to think that's the case.

Or perhaps it's the fact that I once told her to think of me as a brother that's backfiring? Hmm, when I think about it, that explanation seems to make the most sense given Yukina's behavior so far…

"What's wrong, Yamashika? What's got you thinking so hard? I'm pouring for you, so drink up."

What's so enjoyable about being poured a drink by a guy? I couldn't help but think that, but moping over a woman like this was starting to make me feel foolish. I downed the beer in one gulp, intending to drown my sorrows.

"Oh, nice chug! Since it's a rare occasion for the three of us to be together again, let's go all out tonight. Come on, let's keep it going."

Another yellow liquid quickly filled my glass.

Indeed, reconnecting with this guy at a hot spring inn so far from home could only be described as fate.

"Well, fine. I've come to terms with it. I guess I'll be a believer in fate for tonight, and I'll stick with you to the end!"

I downed yet another beer.

◆

"Whew, that was a good meal. I'm satisfied."

"…Well, of course, you'd be satisfied after eating that much."

Satsuki glanced sideways at Ujigami, who was rubbing his stomach contentedly, with a hint of exasperation.

By the time an hour had passed, the table was almost empty.

Ujigami had eaten most of it. He had always been a big eater, even more than his appearance would suggest. While he didn't eat our portions, he devoured everything the three women

couldn't finish, and even after the hot pot was empty, he still had rice and made porridge out of it. He must have eaten at least three bowls of rice.

"It seems your voracious appetite hasn't changed one bit."

"When you use your brain as much as I do, you burn a lot of calories."

He didn't even flinch at my sarcastic comment.

Kageno and I, on the other hand, had slowed down our drinking now that we were full, and were just sipping beer and wine.

It was around that time that Satsuki threw a question at Ujigami.

"Hey, hey, you're doing that 'medical coroner' thing, right?"

She addressed him so casually, despite him being older, meeting him for the first time today, and being both intimidating and large. You could call her reckless or outright fearless.

Though Ujigami didn't have the friendliest appearance, he was known in college as someone who was always joking around and was relatively easy to get along with. But at the same time, he was also known as one of the people you should never make angry. If you did, he'd smile eerily and beat you unconscious, no doubt about it. And being a medical student, his blows would always hit the vital points, just hard enough to leave no lasting damage.

Even if she didn't know this, I couldn't believe she had the nerve to ask such a bold question of someone like Ujigami.

…Then again, considering that she's always been surrounded by Kageno, who's even more antisocial than Ujigami, maybe she's built up some immunity.

"Yeah, I'm definitely doing that 'medical coroner' thing."

Despite Satsuki's somewhat rude question, Ujigami answered without seeming particularly offended. It seemed that he wasn't the type to get angry, especially not in front of his wife and a kid.

"So, what exactly is a 'medical coroner'? I heard you're a doctor, but I don't really get it."

"They're the people who make a living cutting open dead bodies," I answered on his behalf.

"…You're picking a fight with me, aren't you, Yamashika? What am I, a zombie?" Ujigami glared at me with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t think I said anything wrong.”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong, but there’s a better way to say it.”

"Cutting open dead bodies...? Ah, I see!" Satsuki clapped her hands as if she understood.

“So, you’re like a forensic pathologist?”

“No, that's not it. I do perform autopsies, but what I do is called an ‘administrative autopsy.’”

“Huh?” Satsuki’s face showed confusion. “What’s that? How is it different?”

“…What a pain. Do I really have to explain everything?”

“Come on, dear,” his wife interjected as Ujigami made a reluctant face.

“Your work is important. You should explain it to an earnest girl like Iyo.”

An earnest girl like Iyo! There were people who would give such a high evaluation to what was essentially a brat. Or maybe Satsuki had been playing the role of a “well-behaved kid” behind my back. Now that I think about it, I recall Ujigami’s wife saying something absurd like, ‘I hope this child grows up to be as energetic as Iyo,’ during the meal.

Mass-producing Satsukis? That’s insane. Are they trying to destroy the world? Or is this whole Christian thing a lie, and she’s actually a cult member waiting for Armageddon? Yeah, that would explain why she ended up with someone like Ujigami. These were the kinds of thoughts swirling in my alcohol-addled brain.

“Well, I suppose I can’t avoid it. We’ve got time, so I’ll explain,” Ujigami said, scratching his head, but he didn’t seem entirely displeased as he began to speak.

“In general, when a murder occurs, an autopsy is conducted under the supervision of a prosecutor by a forensic expert, usually a professor from a medical university. Do you know what an autopsy conducted under the authority of the law is called?”

“A forensic autopsy, right?”

“Exactly. Now, the difference between that and the administrative autopsies that we forensic pathologists perform is… To put it simply, it’s an autopsy conducted by a forensic pathologist at the administrative level.”

“…I still don’t really get it.”

I couldn’t help but agree.

“Well, I figured as much. Let’s change the topic a bit. For example, if someone dies from an illness, do you know what procedures are followed?”

“…”

No one could answer.

I had had a few experiences with the death of someone close, but I didn’t recall ever handling any procedures.

“You have to report it to the local government, don’t you?” It was Yukina who answered.

“Yes, you do need to report it to the local authorities; otherwise, you can’t even cremate the body.

But before that, you have to get a death certificate from a doctor. Only after you have that document can you proceed with the funeral.

If the death wasn’t due to illness but was instead the result of a murder, as I mentioned earlier, a forensic autopsy would be conducted under the prosecutor’s supervision. After the investigation and all the procedures are completed, the body can be released for the funeral.

Now, here’s the question: what procedures do you think are followed when the cause of death isn’t something clear-cut like illness or murder? I’m talking about cases like suicide or natural death.”

“…I’m not sure, but wouldn’t you still have a doctor examine the body? If they determine it was a natural death, they’d issue a death certificate, right?”

“That’s how it used to be. But it’s not easy for just any doctor to determine the cause of death for someone who’s already dead. It takes someone with specialized training, like us forensic pathologists.

So in such cases, the police step in to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death. Meanwhile, we forensic pathologists perform an administrative autopsy to determine the cause of death and confirm that there’s no foul play involved.

If no foul play is found, the body is handed over to the family for cremation. But if foul play is suspected, that’s when a full-scale criminal investigation begins, and a forensic autopsy is conducted.”

“I see. So that’s how you determine whether a death that looks like a suicide or natural cause is actually a murder in disguise?”

“Exactly. Now, back to the main point.

The reason why autopsies conducted by forensic pathologists are called ‘administrative autopsies’ is because they are, quite frankly, part of a local government system known as the ‘medical examiner system.’ It’s a system that’s only implemented in certain prefectures.

If a forensic autopsy is an autopsy conducted under the judiciary, then an administrative autopsy is, as the name suggests, an autopsy conducted under the administration. It’s said to be work that protects the human rights of the deceased.”

With that, Ujigami concluded his explanation.

I’d vaguely heard about the medical examiner system before, but I didn’t realize it was part of a government-level system.

“Huh. So you look at dead bodies every day?”

“Pretty much. But it’s not such a bad job. After all, a corpse won’t complain if your hand slips a little while holding the scalpel.”

Satsuki, uncharacteristically, looked a bit queasy, and it was around that time—

“Oh dear, it seems she’s tired after all.”

The baby in Ujigami’s wife’s arms had fallen fast asleep.

“Sorry, I’m going to head back to my room. I need to put her to bed.”

“Oh, it’s already this late.”

Yukina glanced at the clock as she spoke.

“Iyo, should we head back too?”

“Yeah, I want to take another dip in the hot spring before bed.”

The conversation came to a quick conclusion.

Yukina smiled at me and said, “Goodnight, Mr. Zenko, everyone.”

“Y-Yeah. See you tomorrow.”

I had no reason to stop them, so I returned a vague farewell and saw them off…

And naturally, that left the three of us guys in the room.

“Well, Kageno, how about another drink?” Ujigami poured more beer into Kageno’s nearly empty glass.

“But man, I’m surprised Yamashika hasn’t gotten anywhere with this. I didn’t think he’d just let her go with a ‘Goodnight’ and send her back to her room.”

“Seriously. Ever since he became a lawyer, he’s been completely spineless.”

“Shut up, Kageno. You don’t have a woman either. You’re in the same boat as me.”

“I’m not as desperate as you are. Women are just a hassle to deal with.”

This guy has some pretty cynical views for someone in his early twenties.

“Hmph, you’re all so pathetic. Heh, well, I’ve got Saori, so I’m not complaining. She’s been so busy with the baby and housework lately that we haven’t had much time together. Tonight, I’m going to enjoy myself. A change of scenery makes things more exciting.”

“Guh…”

Considering I had to share a bed with Kageno later, that comment was like picking a fight. I couldn’t help the surge of murderous intent.

“…Are you really planning to do it next to a sleeping baby?”

Kageno asked in a somewhat exasperated tone.

I don’t know why, but when three guys in their twenties get together and drink, the conversation always seems to take a turn for the worse.

Ujigami answered without hesitation.

“Heh. Sure, I can’t go too wild with Iori sleeping next to us. But don’t underestimate me; I’m a doctor, after all.”

Typical Ujigami, casually throwing in an "after all."

And from the way the conversation was going, I gathered that the baby's name was Iori. The mother's name is Saori, and the daughter's name is Iori… Knowing Ujigami, he probably came up with the name on a whim one morning or evening.

"Doctor or not, all you deal with are dead bodies. What does being a doctor have to do with a baby in the first place?"

"Don't you get it, Yamashika? My specialty might be corpses, but I went through medical school, so I know the basics. I can easily get my hands on sleeping pills."

I almost faceplanted on the table.

"Are you seriously planning to drug a baby just for your own desires?"

"You make it sound so dramatic. Look, it's not as big a deal as you're making it out to be. Sure, I love my daughter, but it's also true that with all the focus on raising her, my wife and I haven't had much time for each other. I bet even Iori wants her parents to have some time to relax every now and then."

"That's one hell of a convenient excuse. But drugging your kid to get some alone time — is that really what a parent should do?"

"People say that babies who sleep well grow well, right? Plus, she won't wake up crying in the middle of the night. There's nothing wrong with that."

"…Yeah, sure."

There was nothing more to say except to let him do as he pleased.

I couldn't help but feel sorry for that baby. It's because of parents like this that the number of cases reported to child protective services keeps increasing every year.

But at the same time, as much as I hate to admit it, I couldn't deny that there was a tiny part of me that was envious of Ujigami — just a little, though.

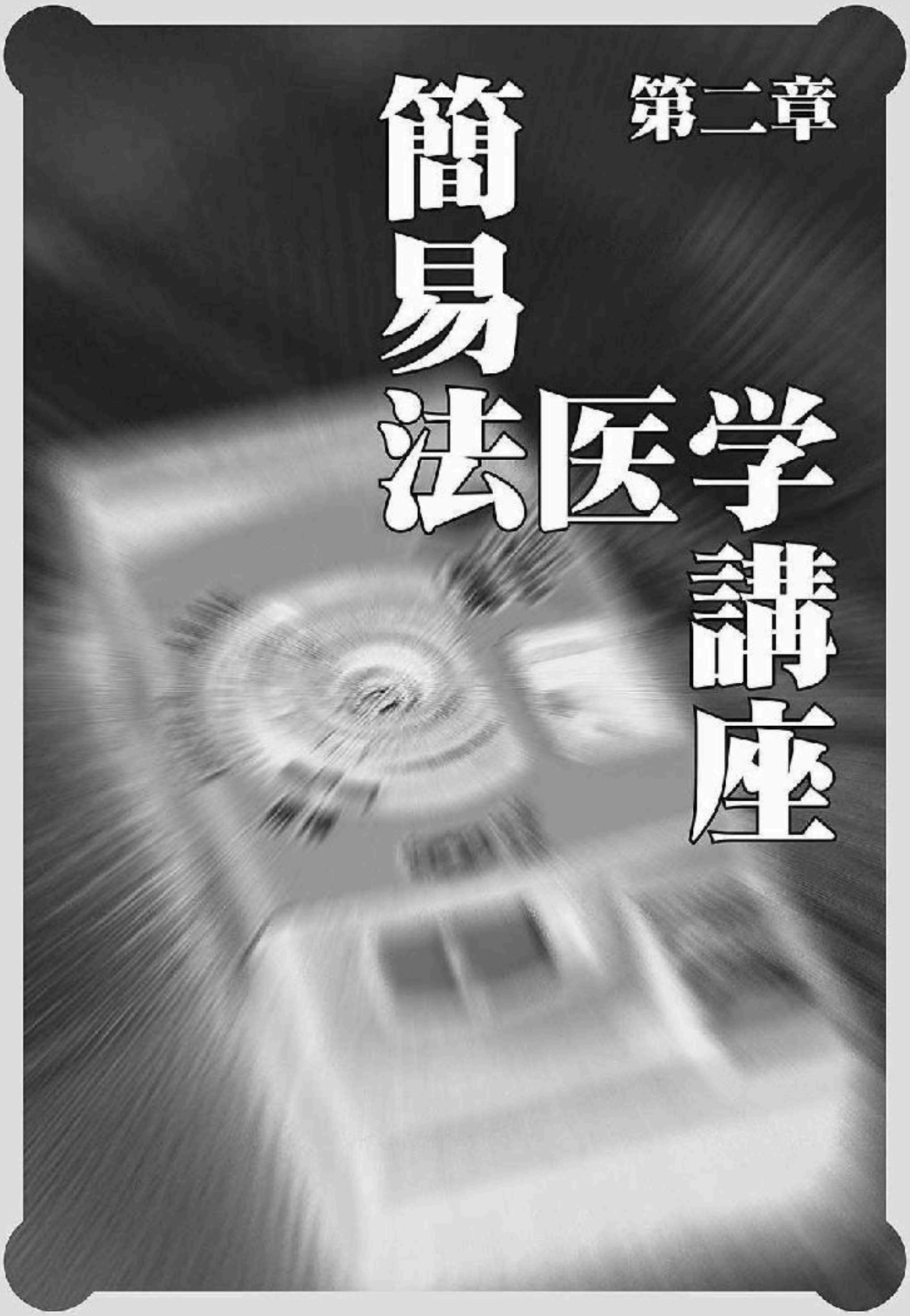
He had a beautiful wife all to himself, even if there was a baby involved.

And then there's me, stuck in a situation where there's a feast laid out just on the other side of the wall, but I can't even touch it. Instead, I'm left here with nothing but this lousy detective for company.

I mean, I came on this overnight hot spring trip with Yukina, full of all sorts of expectations, and now I'm stuck drinking with two other guys. What kind of nonsense is this?

I was on the brink of falling into despair for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

——And that’s when there was a knock on the door, just fifteen minutes later.


第二章
簡易法医学講座

Chapter 2: A Crash Course in Forensic Science

December 7th, 8:54 PM, Utakata Inn, Room 203

Much to my dismay, the drinking session with the two guys was still going on.

“So, Yamashika. You mean you’ve done that whole pointing your finger at someone and saying ‘You’re the culprit!’ thing in court like in the dramas?”

“Yeah. That’s my job.”

“Huh, I always thought being a lawyer was just a hassle, but that part sounds pretty interesting. I’d like to try it at least once — ‘You’re the culprit!’ and all that.”

“Don’t bother, Ujigami,” Kageno interjected. “If you did that, Yamashika would just be happy. More work for him, you know.”

“So, you’re saying I’d be pinning a crime on an innocent person? Nah, I wouldn’t make such a stupid mistake.”

“Who knows? But you, don’t you ever get called to testify in court since you do autopsies and all?”

“No, hardly ever. It’s usually the person who did the judicial autopsy that gets called as a witness. Besides, they don’t let someone like me, a young guy, take on such a prominent role. My boss, who’s all about looking out for his subordinates while being ambitious for promotion, would jump at the chance to take over, even without me asking.”

“It’s tough working under someone, isn’t it?”

Just then, there was a knock on the door, right as I finished my straightforward observation.

“Hey, did someone order more beer?”

“No, not that I remember,” Kageno answered with a shrug. Ujigami shook his head as well. So, who could it be? If it were Yukina or Satsuki, they’d just come in without hesitation. Maybe it was the staff coming to lay out the futons?

As I expected, neither Ujigami nor Kageno showed any intention of answering the door. Feeling somewhat unwilling, but knowing I was far more responsible than those two, I reluctantly got up and walked over to the door.

When I opened it, there were two people standing there.

One was a middle-aged man with barcode-like hair. I recognized him. He was the owner and employee of this inn, Igarashi, who I'd chatted with briefly when filling out the guest register. The other person was, for some reason, Ujigami's wife.

"Excuse me, may we have a moment of your time?"

Igarashi was the first to speak.

"Uh, sure, what is it?"

"I'm sorry to bother you at this time, Mr. Yamashika, but my husband has something he needs to take care of," Ujigami's wife said, looking genuinely apologetic.

"…Well, come on in for now."

If someone's wife says she needs to see her husband, I have no right to stop her. I invited the two of them into the room.

"What's up, Saori? Is Iori already asleep?" Ujigami asked, noticing his wife.

"Yes, Iori is asleep, but… it seems something has happened. Please listen to what Mr. Igarashi has to say."

"I'm terribly sorry, everyone, for barging in at such an hour…" Igarashi said, sitting down properly and bowing his head apologetically. He looked like someone who had come to a loan shark to beg for an extension on his debt.

"There's been a bit of a situation, and the town's local police officers are asking for your help, Dr. Ujigami."

They were asking for Ujigami's help? From the way he phrased it, it sounded like they were praying to some sort of god. If there really were a god like him, it would be terrifying.

"Oh, you need me for something? Is it an emergency?"

For some reason, Ujigami looked oddly pleased as he continued,

"Well, I guess there aren't many doctors around in a place like this. Fine, I'll take a look. I was getting a bit tired of dealing with dead bodies all the time anyway."

I'd rather not think that this was something a doctor would say.

"N-No, it's not exactly that… We do need your help, but the person we need you to see is, uh…"

Igarashi rubbed his thinning hair, looking even more apologetic.

…From the moment this trip was planned, I had a faint premonition.

I had a feeling it might turn out like this.

“…It’s a dead body.”

◆

“…”

After a brief silence, Kageno shot me a meaningful look.

I could guess what he was thinking. The undeniable fact was that recently, dead bodies seemed to follow me wherever I went. I was even starting to feel a bit like the Grim Reaper myself.

Of course, if dead bodies kept showing up wherever a criminal defense lawyer went, it meant there would be no shortage of work. It’s a bit like being a fireman who starts fires just to put them out. As inappropriate as it may be, I almost welcomed the idea of being a Grim Reaper.

The only downside would be that when I die, I’m definitely going straight to hell.

“About an hour ago, one of our guests was found hanging by the neck,” Igarashi began to explain, scratching his head again — no wonder his hair was thinning.

“We panicked and called the town’s only two police officers. They contacted the prefectural police for backup, but… It’s quite common around here in the cold, and the roads in this area are closed at night. They won’t arrive until tomorrow morning…

But leaving a body hanging by a rope all night wouldn’t sit well with me, and it wouldn’t be fair to the deceased either. That’s when I remembered Dr. Ujigami’s profession.

I’m a bit of a mystery fan, so I know a little about forensic pathologists. I’m pretty sure when a suicide like this is discovered, the first person to examine the body is supposed to be a forensic pathologist, right?”

“…Well, yeah, that’s generally how it goes.”

Perhaps sensing where the conversation was headed, Ujigami's voice carried a hint of irritation.

"The police officers said they're well aware of the role of a forensic pathologist and that they'd get approval from their superiors. They're asking if you could please lend us your expertise."

"So, what you're saying is," Ujigami said with a sigh, "you want me to go examine the body right now?"

Igarashi bowed his head even lower, looking truly sorry.

"Yes, I'm really sorry… Under the current circumstances, it seems there's no other option…"

I could understand why Ujigami looked so displeased. No one would be happy about being asked to work during their time off, especially when that work involved examining a corpse.

And now, the person being asked to do this was the self-centered Ujigami. The odds were not in favor of him agreeing. I couldn't imagine him accepting such a request.

But then—

"Oh, please don't worry about it. If we can be of any help, we'd be happy to assist. Right, Kudoku?"

To my surprise, Ujigami's wife responded cheerfully, immediately accepting the request. She flashed a bright smile at her husband.

And then, astonishingly, Ujigami merely clicked his tongue, got up, and said, "Tch. Guess I'll go take care of it…"

"Well, this is a rare sight," Kageno commented, voicing my thoughts.

"You're actually willing to work during your vacation, and voluntarily at that? Is the world about to freeze over?"

"Hmph. Don't compare the current me to the me from two years ago. People change with time, you know."

He said something that didn't suit him at all. I couldn't believe that the once arrogant, self-centered Ujigami was saying something like this. Could marriage really change a person that much?

Tightening the belt of his loose yukata, Ujigami stood in front of his wife.

"Alright, I'm heading out, Saori. I'll be back in about an hour, so keep an eye on Iori, okay?"

“Yes, dear.”

What happened next left me completely dumbfounded.

Ujigami casually placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder, and then, without warning, he leaned in and kissed her.

He kissed her boldly, confidently, as if to show off in front of us.

Kageno, expressionless, let out a low whistle.

Yeah, okay, I get it. You’re married, so it’s normal to kiss your wife before you head out to work. Sure, I’m not a high school kid anymore, so seeing a kiss or two right in front of me isn’t going to surprise me.

But for it to be Ujigami, of all people, showing off like that — it didn’t just make me angry, it made me feel murderous. As if my already considerable frustrations weren't enough!

Unforgivable. I knew this was just petty jealousy, but that didn’t make it any easier to forgive Ujigami. Just wait, this trip isn’t over yet. Before we head back, I’m going to make a move on Yukina, and I’ll show him something way more intense than what he just flaunted.

…Though, even I had a feeling that was probably just wishful thinking.

“Oh, by the way,” Ujigami said, as if the kiss he’d just shown off was nothing at all, turning to face Kageno and me.

“Come to think of it, you guys know a fair bit about dead bodies, don’t you?”

Given it was Ujigami, I’d assumed he was about to brag about having someone to kiss, but it seemed he really didn’t care. That just made me even angrier.

In the end, neither Kageno nor I responded to Ujigami’s question. Sure, we might have more experience with dead bodies than the average person, but nowhere near as much as someone who deals with them for a living.

Ujigami must have taken our silence as confirmation, because he gestured lightly with his hand.

“Come on, follow me. I might as well show you how I work. You’ve got nothing better to do tonight anyway, right? And you’re warmed up now, aren’t you?”

Why the hell did I come all the way to a hot spring inn, only to end up going out into the freezing night with a bunch of guys to see a dead body? — Yeah, that thought definitely crossed my mind.

But still, maybe it’s a professional hazard, because I couldn’t deny that I was somewhat interested. Besides, if I stayed here, all I’d end up doing was drinking more and passing out.

“Fine. I’ll go.”

“I don’t mind either. I wouldn’t say I’m not interested,” Kageno added.

And so, in the end, I found myself heading out into the freezing cold with three other guys to look at a dead body.

It was a real shame that, on this rare overnight trip, there wasn’t going to be anything remotely romantic happening. That was my only regret.

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Igarashi led us out of the inn and towards the outskirts of town. It seemed the body hadn’t been found inside the inn.

As we moved further from the town, the number of streetlights dwindled, and the only light to illuminate our path came from Igarashi’s flashlight and the stars. Still, the snow had been cleared pretty well, and the path was in decent condition, so it wasn’t too difficult to walk.

“Hey, Kageno. You’re still smoking those things?”

As we walked, Ujigami suddenly said this. I glanced over and saw Kageno with a cigarette in his mouth, reaching for a lighter.

“…So what if I am? You used to smoke too, you know.”

“Hmph, I quit when I got together with Saori. You should quit too. Smoking is just bad for your health. Trust me, I’m a doctor.”

“I have no desire to live longer if it means giving up the things I enjoy.”

“Stubborn bastard… Whoa, whoa—”

Ujigami stumbled a bit, as if he'd tripped on something. Well, it was dark, so that wasn't surprising… but then something occurred to me.

"Hey, Ujigami. Now that I think about it… aren't you completely wasted right now?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Do I look drunk to you? I just tripped over a rock."

Ujigami's tone was firm, and his steps were steady.

It was true that he was the type who never showed any signs of being drunk, like slurred speech or a flushed face, no matter how much he drank. But even so, we'd been downing beers and wine earlier — there's no way he wasn't drunk. Could he really perform an examination in this condition?

In less than three minutes, our destination came into view.

The location was an old storeroom — or rather, a barn — on the outskirts of town.

It was a small, single-story wooden building that looked like the kind of barn you'd find in any rural area, practically screaming "barn" with its quaint, nostalgic appearance. I could easily imagine dusty, old farming tools from a bygone era sitting inside.

At the entrance, two police officers were shivering in the cold. If this were the city, the area would be roped off with police tape, and several stern-faced officers would be keeping gawkers at bay. But this was a rural town with only two local cops. Until reinforcements arrived, all they could do was guard the barn's entrance.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I've brought Dr. Ujigami," Igarashi said, introducing Ujigami to the older of the two officers.

"Ah, so you're Dr. Ujigami. I apologize for troubling you at such a late hour. I'm Kinoshita, the local officer here. That over there is Yamada, my colleague."

Kinoshita, the one doing the introductions, extended his right hand for a handshake, shivering in the cold. The officer introduced as Yamada gave a slight nod.

Kinoshita forced a smile, but he looked like a rather gruff old man. On top of that, his rank insignia indicated he was only a sergeant. It wasn't polite to say it, but for his age, that was a pretty low rank. He probably lost out in the city's power struggles and ended up taking this rural post — something like that.

As for Yamada... I decided not to bother remembering any more names and faces.

Ujigami shook Kinoshita's outstretched hand.

"I've been briefed on the situation. I don't want to catch a cold, so could we get straight to the scene?"

"Of course. But, uh, who are these gentlemen…?" Sergeant Kinoshita looked at Kageno and me with a puzzled expression.

"These two are my juniors. They said they wanted to see how I work for their own education. Don't worry, they know how to conduct themselves at a crime scene."

Without batting an eye, Ujigami coolly lied through his teeth.

Well, it's true that I had attended the same university as Ujigami, so I guess you could call me his junior. But we were in completely different departments, and Kageno hadn't even gone to college.

Sergeant Kinoshita looked conflicted. He probably didn't want to let outsiders onto the scene. But at the same time, he felt a bit guilty about dragging Ujigami out here in the middle of the night. Seemingly unable to refuse outright, he finally nodded.

"Alright, then. This way, please."

He slid the barn door open.

The outside looked rundown, but the barn had electricity, and the inside was bathed in a warm, orange light.

As expected, the barn was filled with old, dusty farming tools from a different era.

And then, what we came for immediately caught our eyes.

"I see. This is definitely a hanging."

Kageno spoke in his usual emotionless tone.

A body hanging by the neck. It was suspended in the center of the barn, about twenty or thirty centimeters off the ground. The body was facing away from us, dangling limply. The yukata it was wearing had the same design as ours. Well, that made sense, since the person had probably been staying at the same inn.

The body seemed to belong to an elderly woman. She was small, with hair that had turned completely white. Her ankles, visible beneath the hem of the yukata, looked extremely thin. There was something profoundly sad about her, perhaps because of how frail and tiny she appeared.

The rope that held the corpse was looped over a crossbeam near the top of the barn. Just behind the body, there was a wooden platform about fifty centimeters high. The person had probably jumped from there. The rope was tied in a knot directly behind the neck, and it appeared to be tightly constricting the throat.

“Do we know the identity of this elderly woman?” Ujigami asked, his expression oddly solemn.

“Yes, we know her well. She’s a woman named Shoko Ichinomiya who was staying at our inn,” answered the older man, Igarashi.

“Have you already contacted her family?”

“No, not yet. Her family is staying at the inn as well, but… I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to summon them while she’s still in this state.”

I see. That makes sense. If the family were to see such a scene, they would hardly remain calm. They might even try to take down the body against orders.

“She seems rather thin.”

“Yes, as you can see, she was quite elderly, and I heard that the strain she put on herself during her younger years had recently taken a toll on her health. For the past four months, she’d been staying at our inn for hot spring therapy.”

A few months of hot spring therapy at an inn.

That suggests she came from a wealthy family. Where there’s money, trouble often follows. From the serious expression on Ujigami’s face, it seemed like things were about to take an intriguing turn.

Just then, I noticed Kageno was peering at my face.

“What? Is there something on my face?”

“…No. I was just wondering why you’ve been looking so pleased with yourself.”

“It’s your imagination.”

I’d known for a while, but Kageno really was a rude guy.

“When did you say the body was found?”

Ujigami asked, directing his question to Officer Kinoshita.

“A little after 7 PM. Someone happened to be passing by and noticed that the barn’s light was left on. They thought it was suspicious and went inside, where they found the body.”

“And where is this witness now?”

Always suspect the first person who finds the body — that’s the rule. I asked the question almost reflexively, out of habit.

However, it seemed Sergeant Kinoshita still viewed me as nothing more than Ujigami’s tag-along, because he looked at me with a displeased expression that said, “Don’t ask unnecessary questions, outsider.” How rude. Maybe I should introduce myself as the great defense attorney, Zenko Yamashika.

In the end, it was Igarashi who answered my question.

“It was a man named Suzuki, one of our employees. He was acquainted with the guest. For now, we’ve asked him to stay at home.”

I see. I had been a bit puzzled as to how this Igarashi fellow got involved in the case, but that made sense. If a guest committed suicide, it would be a big deal for the inn, so they must have gone to consult with Igarashi, the innkeeper.

Still, why is it that when I hear plain names like “Suzuki” or “Yamada,” I immediately assume they have nothing to do with the case?

“When we contacted headquarters, they said that, for now, we should at least determine whether there’s any criminal element involved…”

“I understand. If this is just a simple suicide, I can help with that. Sergeant Kinoshita, do you have a camera or something?”

“Yes, I thought it might be needed, so I brought this, if it’ll suffice…”

Sergeant Kinoshita handed over a disposable camera, the kind you might find in a souvenir shop. The label read “Snuff Kids.”

“Well, that’ll do just fine.” Ujigami took the Snuff Kids camera and immediately began snapping pictures.

It's a minor detail, but I'm pretty sure photos that capture actual murders are called "snuff photos." If that "Snuff" label wasn't just a typo for "Snap," then this camera was disturbingly fitting for the scene.

Ujigami kept taking pictures of the corpse from various angles until the film ran out, then finally lowered the camera.

"Judging by the lack of livor mortis, the time of death can't have been long ago. I'd estimate it's been no more than one or two hours. Taking this many photos at this stage should be helpful for the investigation.

Ideally, we should move the body to do a more thorough examination… but Sergeant Kinoshita, I assume it's best not to move the corpse? Especially since the forensic team isn't here yet."

"Yes, headquarters strictly ordered us not to move it. But is it really okay to leave her hanging like this overnight? I mean, if the pressure on her neck increases any further…" Sergeant Kinoshita trailed off, clearly uncomfortable.

"Well, the temperature's low enough, so decomposition shouldn't advance much. And though it's a bit insensitive to say, this person doesn't seem very heavy. I doubt the body will suffer any further damage. It's best to wait until the police arrive tomorrow before moving the body."

"U-understood. We'll do that. So, this is a suicide… right?"

"Well… I wonder about that…" Ujigami walked around to the front of the body, adopting a pensive stance.

I couldn't just keep staring at the back of the corpse, so despite my reluctance, I decided to join Ujigami. I thought Sergeant Kinoshita might stop me, but he didn't say anything.

And so — I found myself face-to-face with the hanged old woman.

"This is… quite a striking image," Kageno, who had somehow ended up behind me, remarked. For once, I completely agreed with him.

I'm a lawyer who often deals with murder cases. I've seen my fair share of dead bodies. I'm even used to the prosecution presenting graphic photos of corpses in court.

But even I couldn't help but draw in a sharp breath at the sight before me.

The woman's face was red, as if it were covered in welts. It was livor mortis, the pooling of blood after death. Her neck had been constricted, bursting the capillaries, and a small amount of blood was trickling from her nose. Under the dim orange light, the red hue appeared even more ghastly.

And the expression on her face. Her eyelids were open, her vacant eyes staring at nothing in the air above. Her mouth hung open, and perhaps because of the pressure on her neck just below her jaw, her tongue was lolling out. Combined with her red face, it was a horrible thing to think, but she looked just like a ghost out of a horror movie.

I was glad Yukina wasn't here. In fact, I should've brought Satsuki's brat here instead. This image could easily haunt someone's dreams.

"…This is strange." Suddenly, Ujigami muttered, looking puzzled.

He borrowed the flashlight from Sergeant Kinoshita and began examining the body's face in more detail. He seemed especially focused on the eyes and mouth.

"What's wrong? Did something catch your attention?"

"…Yeah. There's something odd here."

Odd…? What could be wrong? There were no signs of a struggle in the room, and the body didn't have any disheveled clothing or defensive wounds — nothing that indicated a fight.

But then Ujigami turned to Sergeant Kinoshita and said something that shocked everyone.

"Sergeant Kinoshita. It seems this isn't a suicide after all."

"Eh!? W-What do you mean? This clearly looks like a suicide…"

"Yes, it does appear that way at first glance. But take a closer look at the scene."

Ujigami pointed to the fifty-centimeter-high wooden platform that was supposedly used for the hanging.

"Sergeant Kinoshita. Looking at this platform, can you imagine how the victim hanged herself?"

"W-What do you mean, 'how'? She just climbed onto the platform, put the noose around her neck, and jumped off, right?"

"Exactly, given the circumstances, it's only natural to conclude that. And that conclusion would be that this is simply a suicide. But you see, strangulation leaves behind a variety of distinct characteristics, depending on the situation.

For example, take a look at this platform. It's about fifty centimeters high, isn't it? Meanwhile, the body is completely suspended about twenty centimeters above the ground. This means that the weight of the victim's body accelerated by thirty centimeters was exerted on the neck all at once.

And the rope is tightly and evenly wrapped around the neck. We call this kind of situation a 'typical hanging.'

The human body is quite peculiar. Do you know what the actual mechanism is that causes death in a hanging?"

"The blood vessels or airways in the neck get blocked, causing suffocation, right?"

I recalled a case I had been involved with before going on this trip. The victim had been strangled back then too.

"That's certainly one possibility. But in a situation like this typical hanging, where the neck is compressed all at once with a force greater than the body's own weight, the carotid sinus and the vagus nerve are instantly compressed, causing cardiac arrest before the body can even suffer from oxygen deprivation, leading to instantaneous death."

"…Ujigami, could you please explain that in simpler language?"

"…Yamashika, could you please shut up for a bit? You're throwing me off." Ujigami said this with a clearly sour face.

He was a demanding guy. But well, what can you do? Unfortunately, it seemed that Ujigami was the main character right now. Besides, I wasn't entirely uninterested in what he had to say, so I'd begrudgingly keep quiet for a bit.

"Let's skip the complicated stuff and get straight to the point. In cases of complete typical hanging like this victim, death occurs instantly due to cardiac arrest, not suffocation. When the heart stops, the blood flow stops too, which means—"

"—The face wouldn't turn red like this, right?"

This time, Kageno interrupted.

Ujigami clicked his tongue once, seemingly annoyed at having his spotlight stolen, but quickly regained his composure and continued.

"Yeah, that's exactly it. If you take a look at this body's face, you'll see that it's red, and there are petechiae — small red dots caused by broken blood vessels — clearly visible in the eyeballs, conjunctiva, and inside the mouth.

Normally, when someone is strangled with hands or a rope, these symptoms are often observed. This happens because the blood vessels in the neck are blocked, causing blood to pool in the head. However, when a person's neck is strangled by human hands, it's impossible

to exert the kind of force that would instantly stop the heart, so the heart doesn't stop immediately.

On the other hand, in typical hanging cases where cardiac arrest occurs instantly, both the arteries and veins completely stop, so the face doesn't turn red, and petechiae don't appear. In other words—"

"This old woman was strangled by some other method, and then her body was staged to look like she hanged herself, right?"

This time, I interrupted.

Ujigami clicked his tongue twice, apparently irritated at having his moment stolen again, but he quickly resumed.

"Yeah. That's pretty much it."

"Hold on, Ujigami. I remember hearing something in a previous trial — when a person is strangled with a rope, they usually struggle to remove it, leaving defensive wounds. But there are no such marks on this body."

"Are you talking about defensive wounds? That applies to healthy people. Take a closer look at this old woman's hands. Her nails are cut short, almost digging into her fingers, and her arms are quite thin. She probably wasn't strong enough to scratch herself hard enough to leave a mark."

When I looked at her drooping arms, I saw that Ujigami was indeed right.

"So, what does that mean?" Officer Kinoshita asked, sounding somewhat excited. "That means this was made to look like a suicide, but—"

"Exactly. It's murder," Ujigami declared with a dramatic tone.

"No way!" Igarashi raised his voice.

"Then who on earth could have done something like this…!?"

"Well, I can't tell you that much. I'm just pointing out what I noticed from examining the body.

But, well, it's not like there aren't any clues."

"A-And what would those be!?" Kinoshita asked eagerly.

“It’s simple. While this body does indeed show many of the characteristics of strangulation, there’s only one ligature mark on the neck — that is, the mark from the rope runs from under the jaw all the way to behind the ear. This suggests that the victim was strangled twice with a rope at the same spot.

There are only two ways to strangle someone in a manner that leaves marks similar to those found in hanging suicides. One is straightforward: you make a noose at the end of a rope, hook it around the victim’s neck, and pull it up from above. The other method is to loop the rope around the victim’s neck, then strangle them by pulling the rope while standing back-to-back.”

“I-I see. Indeed, with that method, the mark would only run from under the jaw to behind the ear.”

Hmm. As much as I hated to admit it, I had to recognize that Ujigami, despite being someone I didn’t particularly like, wasn’t just eating off examining corpses every day without reason. He had managed to deduce all of this just from a quick look at the body. It seems I’d have to reassess my opinion of him, at least in this field.

Officer Kinoshita bowed deeply to Ujigami.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Doctor. You’ve been a great help.”

“No need to thank me, it’s nothing special. But, I’d like to head back to the inn soon. It’s starting to get cold out here in this outfit.”

“Of course. However, I might have to ask you a few more questions at a later date.”

“I understand. Well then, we’ll be leaving now.”

Ujigami glanced at me and Kageno, then headed out of the shed.

I wasn’t thrilled about being bossed around by him, but I had no real reason to stay here any longer, and it was definitely getting cold. I decided to just go along with it for now.

As we were leaving, I overheard Kinoshita and Igarashi talking behind us.

“Mr. Igarashi, there are a couple of things I need to ask you.”

“Yes, yes. Anything I can do to help.”

“The victim’s family is staying at the inn right now, correct?”

“Yes, her husband is staying there. Also, I believe her husband’s younger brother and their daughter were visiting as well. Should I bring them over?”

“Yes. Since there’s now a possibility of murder, we shouldn’t spread the word about this until we’ve organized a proper investigation team… But the husband has the right to know, and we should have a family member confirm the identity of the body.”

“I understand. I’ll bring the husband over later.”

“Please do. Also, could you ensure that no one enters the room where the victim was staying tonight? And could you prepare a list of the guests currently staying at the inn, along with their room assignments, so that we can access it at any time?”

“Understood. I’ll lock up Mrs. Ichinomiya’s room and make sure no one enters. I’ll head back to the inn for now.”

After that conversation, I heard the sound of Igarashi’s hurried footsteps as he came after us.

By this point, even I was starting to shiver from the cold, and my mind was more focused on the thought of drinking hot wine back in the room than on the corpse.

And so, the eventful day finally came to an end.

第三章
軽挙妄動

Chapter 3: Spur of the Moment

December 8th, 7:30 AM, Utakata Inn, Room 203

The next morning.

Much to my dismay, it was the morning after a night spent alone with Kageno.

I sluggishly got out of bed, washed my face, and, having nothing better to do, casually watched the morning news. Before long, there was a loud knock on the door.

“Hey, you lazy bums! Time for breakfast!”

At this inn, dinner was brought to the room, but breakfast had to be taken in the dining hall.

I always wondered why they had such an inconvenient system, but I guess there were quite a few guests who didn’t like the idea of someone suddenly barging into their room in the morning.

“Good morning, Mr. Zenko.”

“Oh, morning.”

I left the room with Kageno, and after meeting up with Yukina and the others in the hallway, we headed to the dining hall.

Getting to see Yukina in her yukata first thing in the morning was quite a treat.

But I wasn’t allowed to indulge in such small pleasures for long.

“Hey, Zenko, something happened last night, didn’t it? The three of you went somewhere, right?”

Satsuki tugged at my sleeve. I knew from experience that when this brat wanted to find something out, she was as persistent as a mosquito. I could ignore her, but then I wouldn’t be able to enjoy a conversation with Yukina.

It would be easy to just tell her that a body was found last night and that I went along to help with the examination. But since we were about to have breakfast, I didn’t want to bring up such a topic in front of Yukina.

“Breakfast first. We’ll have plenty of time later, so I’ll tell you in the car on the way back.”

"Hmph. You'd better! Well, it's probably nothing interesting anyway."

I couldn’t deny that.

And just then — whether it was fate or not — we ran into the Ujigami family.

“Good morning. Did everyone sleep well?”

“Yes, very well,”

Mrs. Ujigami, who seemed to be in an unusually good mood, greeted us, and Yukina, also in high spirits, replied. The baby in her arms was smiling contentedly as well.

However, for some reason, only Ujigami himself looked extremely displeased.

There must have been something that didn’t go his way — Kageno seemed to think the same and asked,

“What’s wrong, Ujigami? You don’t look too happy for someone who had such a fun night.”

Ujigami glared at us and muttered,

“I’m exercising my right to remain silent.”

I grinned. Something must have happened that was absolutely hilarious.

“Oh, come on, senior Ujigami. You really think that excuse is going to fly? If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine, but I could always tell your wife all about your college exploits.”

“…”

Ujigami shut his eyes and ran his hands through his hair in frustration.

Realizing that his right to silence wasn’t going to work, he sighed heavily and whispered in a voice low enough that the women couldn’t hear,

“…I accidentally drank the hot water with sleeping pills that was meant for Saori.”

“Pff! Hahahaha!”

Kageno and I couldn’t hold back our laughter.

“Serves you right! That’s what you get for trying to do something indecent in front of a baby!”

“Ugh…”

I see, so that’s why his wife was in such a good mood. She must have slept soundly.

But this time, I couldn’t help but feel a little sorry for Ujigami. As a fellow man, I could easily imagine the despair of going to bed all pumped up, only to end up doing nothing.

Thinking about that level of disappointment — well, I couldn’t stop laughing for a while.

“Damn it, laugh all you want. But unlike a certain coward who can’t even make a move with the girl he wants right next to him, I still have plenty of chances when I get back home.”

“Ugh…”

After that, nothing much happened during breakfast — except for Ujigami shocking the staff by eating an entire loaf of toast.

Once breakfast was over, there was nothing left to do but prepare to check out.

A one-night, two-day hot spring trip. I had reunited with Ujigami, an old acquaintance, after two years. I had also experienced the rare event of going with two other guys to see a dead body in the middle of the night.

There might not be many trips that are as memorable as this one.

However, the kind of memories I was hoping for when I went on this hot spring trip were more along the lines of something a bit more “romantic”…

…No, let’s stop. There’s no use dwelling on something that’s already over. Besides, now that I know Yukina likes hot springs, it shouldn’t be too hard to create another opportunity.

It was 9:45 AM. The three women were chatting and browsing souvenirs at the gift shop. With no need to buy any souvenirs myself, I sat on the lobby sofa, watching them absentmindedly. Next to me, Kageno was smoking a cigarette, and Ujigami had gone outside with his daughter, saying something about showing her the snow.

Women’s shopping is never quick. It was during this somewhat relaxed, yet dull, moment that it happened.

“M-Mr. Yamashika!”

The person who called out my surname, adding to it the title “mister” which I hadn’t heard in a few days, was none other than the innkeeper, Barcode Igarashi. He seemed to be in quite a rush, running over without any regard for the other guests.

The sight was familiar. This frantic dash was just like—

“Mr. Yamashika! You’re a lawyer, right? A criminal defense specialist…”

Just like a client rushing into my office because a relative had gotten themselves into trouble.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

I agreed politely. Igarashi, trying to catch his breath, said,

“T-The thing is, there’s someone I urgently need you to defend.”

“Oh?”

Considering what had happened just yesterday, it was probably related to the body we found last night. The police must have already started their investigation, and I assumed someone had been taken in as a person of interest.

“Could you give me a brief overview of the situation?”

I waited for Igarashi to catch his breath before asking.

“Y-Yes. It’s about that body we found. The police arrived at around 8 AM this morning and immediately began a full-scale investigation.”

“I see. And since you’re asking me to defend someone, does that mean someone’s already been arrested?”

“Yes. Not even thirty minutes after the investigation started, a guest staying at the inn, a man named Koji Nioka, was taken to the police station for questioning. A little while ago, I got a call saying he had been arrested…”

Hmm. It’s not even 10 AM yet. That means he was arrested within two hours of the investigation starting. While it’s not an unusual speed for someone like a certain prosecutor I know, it’s still quite fast.

Could it be that the influence of that quack doctor making the baby cry outside the gates is stronger than I thought?

“So, you want me to defend this Nioka person?”

“Yes, if you’re willing!”

“I see. So, this Nioka insists he’s innocent?”

“Yes! And he’s actually the son-in-law of Shoko Ichinomiya, the woman who was found dead last night.

This inn used to be run by Mrs. Ichinomiya, and because of that connection, I know Koji quite well. He may not look it, but he’s a good guy. There’s no way he’d kill his mother-in-law.”

...Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. This was getting confusing.

“W-Wait a minute. Did you say son-in-law?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So, that means this Koji Nioka who was arrested is married to the daughter of Shoko Ichinomiya, the deceased?”

“Yes, exactly. Her name is Mayu Nioka.”

I see. Ichinomiya and Nioka — first ("ichi") and second ("ni"), in order, it seems. The daughter’s last name is different because she got married.

“So, just to clarify, Shoko Ichinomiya, who was killed last night, had a daughter, right?”

"Yes. And that's Mayu Nioka."

Damn it, could he stop throwing so many names at once? It’s a pain to keep track of them all. Blood relations are complicated enough as it is.

“And the person who was arrested is her husband, Koji Nioka, right?”

“Yes.”

“Got it. So, this Koji Nioka is definitely not the kind of person who would commit murder?”

“That’s right. As I mentioned earlier, this inn used to be managed by Mrs. Ichinomiya, and because of that connection, I’ve met the Nioka couple several times. In fact, they both worked here at the inn for a while.”

Alright, I’m finally starting to get the picture.

Is it a professional hazard for a lawyer that they can't understand people's stories without cross-examining them?

"I see, I understand the situation.

I'm not opposed to defending someone who's been falsely accused.

However, there's a bit of a problem. You probably know this already, but my law office is in Kanto. If I take on this case, I'd have to drive four hours every day to attend court here. I don't mind taking the case, but the distance is a bit of an issue. I suggest you look for a local lawyer instead."

"P-Please, you have to help us! I don't know any other lawyer as skilled as you, Mr. Yamashika!

And there's no need for you to commute from your office to the courthouse. If our inn is alright with you, we'll let you stay in a room for free, as long as you need."

I couldn't deny that my eyes sparkled at that very moment.

They'd let me stay in a room, as long as I needed, for free!

Goodbye, harsh reality. Hello again, my youth.

If I took on this case, I could stay at this inn for as many days as it took until the trial was over. This was undoubtedly a chance to fulfill the ambitions I had almost given up on.

Of course, if we went to trial, I'd have to keep Kageno around, much to my dismay. And there was no way I could just suddenly ask to share a room with Yukina. Even if my stay got extended by a few days, there was no guarantee that my ambitions would be realized.

But then again, there's no way that brat Satsuki, who was still in the middle of compulsory education, could stay here, since she had to go to school. I could just have Ujigami take her back. That would leave Yukina alone in her room.

This could be my chance for a nighttime — no, no, perhaps there would be some urgent need for a late-night meeting, giving me an excuse to barge into Yukina's room. Even if it wasn't feasible today or tomorrow, if I waited patiently, the opportunity might come the day after tomorrow, or the day after that.

I no longer had any reason to hesitate.

"Alright, I'll take the case. I appreciate your generous offer."

“Oh, thank you so much! Um, I’m sorry to ask, but could you meet with Koji as soon as possible? He seemed pretty shaken up when I spoke to him on the phone…”

Indeed, since he had already been arrested, I should meet with him sooner rather than later.

“Understood. I’ll go meet him as soon as I’m ready.”

“Thank you. I’ll prepare your room in the meantime.”

“Oh, about that, Mr. Igarashi — if we go to trial, this will be more than I can handle alone. I’ll need my secretary and assistant to stay nearby as well, so could you prepare two rooms for us?”

“It’s no problem at all. Now that you mention it, you stayed in two double rooms last night. Shall I prepare the same rooms?”

“Yes, please do. Three of us will be staying, so that should be fine. Also… I could use a car. I have one, but I’ll need another for my assistant.”

“Understood. I have a personal car available. You’re welcome to use it whenever you need.”

“That’s very helpful.”

“If there’s anything else you need, please don’t hesitate to ask. Well then, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Igarashi bowed deeply and then hurried off to somewhere else.

“Well, that’s how it is. Okay with you, Kageno?”

I said to Kageno, who had been smoking a cigarette with a blank expression the whole time.

“…Well, as long as I have a bed and food, I won’t complain.

But I don’t have many connections in this area. If I bring in a detective I know, it shouldn’t interfere with the job, but… the expenses will be higher than usual.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not coming out of my pocket anyway.”

“Is that so? So, in the end, I’m supposed to investigate those people you mentioned earlier — the ones involved with Ichinomiya?”

“That’s right. Just dig up everything you can on anyone connected to Shoko Ichinomiya, the murder victim.”

“Got it. But Yamashika, do we really need a second room? I know you’re planning to keep Yukina close, but it’s not like you’ll need her to clean up the room or cook meals this time. Won’t she just get bored staying in a place like this for days?”

“…Uh.”

It didn’t occur to me until he said it, but he might have a point.

“N-No, but you see, you’ll be busy with the investigation as usual, so I’ll be stuck in the room the whole time. I could use some company, and I could even take her sightseeing around here. It’ll be fine.”

“So, I’ll be working alone while you get a cozy little situation all to yourself?”

“That’s a rather misleading way to put it. I-I’m not planning to do anything weird, even if we’re alone together.”

“…”

He looked at me with complete distrust.

“…Fine. I’ll head back to the room and get ready. Tell Ujigami I said goodbye, I can't be bothered.”

With that, Kageno picked up his bag and headed back upstairs to the second floor of the inn.

Not even a goodbye to an old acquaintance after two years. Well, that’s just like Kageno.

Then, I heard the loud cries of a baby.

“Wait, why is Kageno going back upstairs?”

I turned around to find Ujigami holding his crying baby.

“Oh, something came up. And you’ve made the baby cry again?”

Ujigami scowled and clicked his tongue.

“I didn’t mean to make her cry. But every time I hold her, this is what happens.”

I can understand why. The baby must instinctively recognize that this guy is dangerous.

As Ujigami tried to soothe the crying baby, he said something utterly ridiculous.

“There, there. Don’t cry, li'l Iori.”

“...!!”

In that instant, a chill ran down my spine, and I shrank back on the sofa.

The same Ujigami who once prowled the streets at night, looking for fights, was now smiling sweetly with a face so gentle it was almost unrecognizable.

Noticing my reaction, Ujigami quickly reverted to his usual expression.

“…What’s with that look, Yamashika?”

“N-Nothing, really.”

It’s terrifying. Absolutely terrifying.

More than anything, it’s unsettling to hear someone like Ujigami use baby talk. If you want to know how unsettling, just imagine Kageno saying, “There, there.”

And that smile — that terrifying smile.

Just a few years ago, whenever this guy smiled, it meant someone was about to get seriously hurt. No wonder the baby can’t stop crying after seeing that smile…

“Well, whatever. Just make the baby stop crying already. I can’t stand all the stares we’re getting.”

The lobby at this time of day was fairly busy with guests and staff. Almost everyone was glancing our way. To them, it probably looked like two grown men were making a baby cry. I’m used to being the center of attention in a courtroom, but this situation was making me feel uneasy.

But Ujigami wasn’t the kind of guy to be rattled by something like this.

“Hmph, everybody cried when they were babies. If you’re going to get hung up on people staring at you, you’ll never be able to raise a kid. You’ll have to deal with this kind of thing yourself someday, so you might as well get used to it now.”

“Ugh…”

When he put it like that, even I found it hard to come up with a good response.

To be honest, I can't imagine myself raising a child. Until recently, I was adamant about never getting married or having kids.

But if Yukina were to say something like, "I want to have your child, Mr. Zenko," I'd happily throw all my previous beliefs out the window and help make that happen, anytime, anywhere.

But if that were to happen, I might end up like Ujigami, doting on a child and saying things like, "There, there, it's okay," in that over-the-top parental way. When I think about it that way, I can't really mock Ujigami…

"Oh my, what's wrong, Kudoku?"

At that moment, Ujigami's wife arrived, apparently having heard her daughter crying. She was like a godsend.

"Oh, you're just in time. As you can see, could you take over and calm her down?"

"Here, let me hold her."

She took the baby from him.

A strange thing happened then. The baby, who had been screaming like her lungs were on fire, immediately stopped crying after just a few gentle rocks in her mother's arms.

"…Why does this always happen?" Ujigami muttered, looking a bit embarrassed.

"The baby senses it instinctively — that you're dangerous."

"Shut up."

He didn't deny it, which suggested he was somewhat aware of it.

Just then, I saw Yukina and Satsuki running over, both carrying bags of souvenirs.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Zenko."

"Oh, did you already buy the souvenirs?"

"Yes, we're all set," Satsuki answered for her.

"We don't have any other business at this inn now. It's nice to stay at a hot spring inn once in a while, but I've had enough. I'm the type who can't relax unless I'm connected to the internet every night. Let's hurry back to the city, where I belong."

This kid was an internet addict, wasn't she?

“Ah, about that… Sorry for the sudden news, but something’s come up. I’ve been asked to take on the defense in a murder case that happened last night.”

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?"

I briefly explained to everyone what I had heard earlier from the barcode-haired Igarashi.

It goes without saying that everyone was shocked.

“…So, when you two went off somewhere last night, was it related to that?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Hmm. If something that interesting was going on, why didn’t you call me?”

“Do you really want to lose your appetite? I’m telling you, the body we saw yesterday was pretty gruesome.”

“…Ugh.”

Even the brat was frowning and fell silent at that.

I had got a quack doctor who prefers dead bodies over living ones and a brat who immediately wants to stick her nose into a murder case. Why was I surrounded by such weirdos? I refused to believe that “birds of a feather flock together.”

“Well, that’s how it is. Kageno and I are going to stay at the inn for a while.”

“W-Wait a minute! So how am I supposed to get home? I have school tomorrow!”

“Um…”

Ujigami’s wife, who had been quietly listening, interjected.

“If that’s the case, should we take Iyo back with us in our car?”

I had expected nothing less from Ujigami’s wife. She was bound to make this suggestion.

“That would be a huge help. Could you do that?”

For some reason, I found myself speaking in a more polite tone.

“Of course. Right, dear?”

“Y-Yeah. I guess we have no choice.”

Ujigami said that, but I didn’t miss the momentary grimace on his face. He was probably planning to take a break on the way back and do what he couldn’t do last night.

“Um, Mr. Zenko, what about me…?” Yukina asked hesitantly.

Now was the crucial moment. I had to find a way to convince her to stay.

“Yukina, I’d really appreciate it if you could stay and help me out. Don’t worry about the accommodations; I’ve already arranged for two rooms with Igarashi.”

…Looking back, considering everything that had happened since we arrived at this inn, I should have easily predicted my fate.

But the faint hope of “maybe” and “what if” once again clouded my judgment.

Yukina looked genuinely apologetic as she said,

“I’m sorry, but I have some university obligations this week that I really can’t miss. So I’m afraid I can’t help this time…”

“…Oh, I see.”

December 8th, 11:30 AM, Holding Cell

The holding cell. No matter what prefecture you were in, the layout inside was always the same.

To describe where I was sitting now, one sentence would suffice: I was in a visitation room, separated by a transparent plastic wall.

The current time was 11:30 AM. I’d heard that the arrest took place around 10:00 AM, so quite some time had passed. Normally, I should have met with the suspect before the police interrogation to warn them not to say anything unnecessary. Considering that, I was a bit late this time.

The main reason for the delay was that it took about 45 minutes to drive here from Abuku Town. But that wasn’t the only reason. In the end, Yukina and Satsuki went home in Ujigami’s car, and I needed some time to curse my own foolishness and pull myself together.

At one point, I considered abandoning this case and going back with them. But unfortunately, I had already committed to taking on the case. And it wouldn't look good if I left without even meeting the client. I was already known as a lawyer who didn't care much for ethics and regulations.

If I could at least refer the client to another lawyer, it might have been a different story, but I was a lone wolf, and I didn't know anybody in this remote area.

So, I ended up just regretting my poor judgment. I decided to wrap up the trial as quickly as possible and return to Yukina — I finally made that resolve around 10:30 AM.

Soon after, a uniformed officer brought a man to sit across from me.

He looked to be around thirty years old. His height and weight seemed average, with no particularly notable physical features.

But the problem was his expression.

Just by looking at his face, I could tell he'd probably drawn the short straw in life more often than not. Even though it was our first meeting, I couldn't help but think that. He wasn't the kind of man you'd associate with words like "honest" or "sincere."

Kageno and Ujigami were far from being described as honest, but this guy was in a completely different category. His narrow eyes and downturned mouth gave him an unpleasant appearance. According to Igarashi with the barcode hair, this guy supposedly didn't have a bad personality, but…

"You're Koji Nioka, right?"

"Yes. You're my attorney, Zenko Yamashika, correct? Mr. Igarashi told me about you."

Contrary to his appearance, his tone was quite normal — if anything, it was rather polite.

"Well, that makes things easier. Since I've been assigned as your defense attorney, I look forward to working with you."

"No, no, the pleasure is all mine. I'm honored to have such a renowned lawyer as yourself defending me. I look forward to working with you."

He bowed politely at a 30-degree angle.

I see. Although we had only spoken briefly, he didn't seem to have a particularly bad personality. It didn't seem like he was intimidated by the situation either. Maybe he had been a delinquent in the past who turned over a new leaf.

Even so, that face of his was a problem. Not only would it not sit well with the police, but it was also unlikely to be well-received by the jury. Well, as usual, if I could settle this case before it went to a jury decision, it wouldn't be an issue, but it was definitely a negative factor. I wonder if having him undergo plastic surgery during bail would be considered aiding and abetting an escape?

"Well then, Mr. Nioka, let's get right to it. I only heard about the case this morning. I know you're the son-in-law of the deceased Mrs. Ichinomiya and that you were staying at the same inn last night. So, can you explain how you ended up getting arrested?"

"Y-Yes… Um, Mr. Yamashika, how much do you know about my mother-in-law's death?"

"I heard she was found hanging in a shed on the outskirts of town last night."

I couldn't very well tell him I went to see the scene because I was bored.

"I see, very well.

This happened this morning. I think it was around 8:30 AM when I was watching TV in my room at the inn, and suddenly Mr. Igarashi called me out, saying the police wanted to talk to me because my mother-in-law had been found hanging."

"I see. And then?"

Nioka closed his eyes, his face a mixture of emotions.

"They took me to the scene where she was found hanging. Mind you, the body was already gone by then…

Then, the detective on the scene suddenly said something strange to me.

He said they'd already done a certain amount of investigation on the body and that they'd discovered something.

Then he asked me to tell him where I was and what I was doing around 7:00 PM yesterday."

I see, so they were verifying his alibi.

"And how did you respond?"

"I told him the truth. I said I was alone in my room the whole time."

"So, you don't have an alibi, then?"

“N-No, I don’t… Then the detective suddenly asked me this: ‘Your room was directly above the victim’s room, wasn’t it?’”

“…And what did you say?”

“I told him that was correct. I was in room 215 at the inn. My mother-in-law was staying in the room directly below.”

“Hmm. Was there any particular reason for that?”

“My mother-in-law had a bad back, so she couldn’t use a room on the second floor. The room she stayed in had the best view in the inn. So, she was considerate enough to arrange for me to stay in room 215, which has an even better view.”

“I see. And then?”

“Yes. After hearing my story, they said they wanted to hear more details and asked me to accompany them to the police station.

Well, I’m innocent, so I thought there’d be no problem and went with them, but once we got there, they suddenly accused me of killing my mother-in-law.

Of course, I denied it. But they said I was the only one who could have strangled her and made it look like a suicide, even though she was supposed to be in her room the whole time. They also said they had an eyewitness.

After that… I didn’t really understand what was happening anymore. I kept insisting I didn’t do anything, but then suddenly they produced an arrest warrant…”

“I see. So, that’s how we got to this point.”

This story just wasn’t adding up.

In other words, the police must have already figured out how this Nioka guy killed the victim. Whether Nioka denied it or not, his arrest had already been decided.

Still, if the police had arrived at the scene around 8:00 AM and arrested him within two hours, that seemed too fast. If some ruthless prosecutor was in charge, that would make sense, but there’s no way that guy would go out of his way to meddle in a place like this.

So, could it be Ujigami’s doing? After hearing Ujigami’s story last night, the police might have figured out the gist of the case before starting a full investigation. Then, following that line of

reasoning, they conducted their investigation, which quickly led to Nioka's arrest — that would make some sense…

"The police said there was an eyewitness, right? Do you know anything about that?"

"Well, they didn't tell me any details… But apparently, someone claimed to have seen me carrying my mother-in-law, who appeared to be unconscious, outside last night."

"I see, I see. And, of course, you have no memory of that, right?"

"Of course not! I was alone in my room the whole night."

I see, if that eyewitness account is true, it was pretty damning.

But on the other hand, if it wasn't true, then we might have found another suspect.

It's a simple story. If Nioka wasn't lying, then the eyewitness must be lying. And if they were lying to pin the blame on Nioka, the reason was obvious — they were the real culprit.

However, it felt a bit too blatant. If it was discovered that the eyewitness gave false testimony, they'd become the prime suspect. I didn't know who this eyewitness was, but would they really take such a risk?

"You said you were alone in your room all night, but is there really nothing that could serve as an alibi? Did you call anyone? Meet anyone?"

"No, there's nothing… I was supposed to be staying at the inn with my wife, but she had to leave for work, so I was alone that night."

I see, so no alibi. Well, if he had one, he wouldn't have been arrested.

But it's strange that his wife suddenly had to leave. It's common enough in this country for work to suddenly call someone in, but the fact that it happened on the same day the body was found… Who said, "Two coincidences are a clue"?

"Mr. Nioka, this might be a bit difficult to ask, but… Does your wife have an alibi for last night?"

Nioka's expression changed noticeably.

"Are you suggesting my wife is a suspect?"

"Well, who knows? I can't rule out the possibility."

“No! That’s impossible. My wife lost her father when she was a teenager. After that, her mother raised her all on her own. Of course, my wife cherished her mother. There’s no way she would ever kill her. Besides, my wife was back at work last night. Her colleagues should be able to confirm her alibi.”

“What does your wife do?”

“She works in fashion design. It’s a world I don’t really understand as a man.”

This gives me something for Kageno to look into. I’ll have him verify her alibi.

“Alright, I think I’ve got the gist of it. Just one more thing… What motive do the police think you had for killing the victim?”

“Well… My mother-in-law remarried about five or six years ago and has a second husband, but the only other immediate family is my wife. The detective said it was likely for the inheritance…”

"Understood. Then could you answer one question honestly? Have you had any financial difficulties recently?"

Nioka scratched his head awkwardly.

"Well, actually… I was laid off recently. I’ve been looking for a job ever since.

But, I mean, I do have unemployment benefits, and though it’s a bit embarrassing to admit, my wife’s earnings help too, so it’s not like we’re in serious trouble financially..."

"I see."

So a motive did come up after all. This guy had the face of a villain, and no matter how much he insisted he wasn't in financial trouble, there’s no way the police would interpret that in our favor. Even if he had unemployment benefits and his wife’s income, it wasn't unheard of for someone to commit a crime just out of the desire for some extra spending money. That could certainly be considered a motive.

Well, I’ve pretty much asked everything I needed to. I made sure to impress upon him that he should never say a word to the police if questioned and then left the detention center.

<u>December 8th, 3:45 PM, Utakata Inn, Room 203</u>

It was the same room 203 at the Utakata Inn where I stayed last night. Last night, this room was bustling with six people and a baby, but now it was just me in a yukata and Kageno in his casual clothes.

How many times have I regretted not having Yukina here with me?

"…Hey, Yamashika. Are you listening? Should I continue with the report?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

I waved my hand to prompt him to continue.

"Geez… I'm only going to say this once. First, about the victim."

Kageno, despite everything, was a self-employed private investigator. Typically, when hired for an investigation, he would report his findings in writing, but since he didn't have the tools to prepare such documents this time, he was giving me an oral report.

"Her name was Shoko Ichinomiya… but you probably knew that already. She was 72 years old."

"72, huh? Well, considering how she looked, that makes sense.

But that means she had her daughter quite late in life."

"Yeah, that's right. She lost her parents during the war and apparently went through a lot of hardships when she was young. After various experiences, she got married at 37 and gave birth to her daughter when she was 40.

Even after that, she worked hard and made some investments, eventually amassing a considerable amount of wealth. But a little over ten years ago, she lost her husband, and around that time, she made significant donations to orphanages and other charities. She still had enough assets to live comfortably, but it's unclear if she could really be considered wealthy. Then, six years ago, she remarried, and that's her current husband. However, she's been in poor health for the past six months and has been staying at a hot spring for treatment for the last four months. That's about it."

"What was the cause of her first husband's death?"

"A traffic accident. From what I found, there was nothing suspicious about it."

"That's pretty much what I've heard too. Got it, what's next?"

"Next, let's talk about the victim's second husband, who I just mentioned briefly. His name is Akiyuki Ichinomiya, 73 years old. Unlike his wife, he's in good health. Seems like he has a bit of asthma, though.

As I mentioned earlier, he married the victim about six years ago. He had a wife before that, but she passed away from cancer. Before they got married, he was a diligent salaryman until he

retired. He met the victim at a senior citizens' gathering. Something called the ‘Silver Mountaineering Club’ or something like that. They got along well, having both lost their previous spouses, and after some time, they decided to remarry."

"From what I’m hearing, he sounds pretty decent. You’re sure he doesn’t have any debts or anything?"

"None at all. He’s clean."

"I see, so he seems innocent. Maybe he initially married her for her money, but unless he urgently needed cash, I don’t think he’d go as far as killing his wife for the inheritance."

"Of course, that’s what you’d think. But we can’t completely rule him out. This couple had about 200 thousand dollars worth of life insurance on each other. And I’ve also heard that recently, the husband has gotten tired of taking care of his wife and has been spending more time indulging in his hobbies."

"Oh? What kind of hobbies?"

"He keeps fish. I’m not an expert on fish, but it seems he’s got some pretty expensive ones."

I see. It’s possible he wanted more money to indulge in his hobby.

However, on the other hand, it’s hard to believe that a man who has lived honestly for 70 years would kill his wife just for the sake of a hobby.

"When did they take out that life insurance?"

"Right after they got married, so it’s been six years now. As far as I’ve found, it matured once about ten months ago, and they renewed it after that."

"Ten months, huh..."

Life insurance often served as a motive for murder.

That said, it wasn't particularly unusual for a couple to take out a reasonable amount of life insurance on each other. Even though the Ichinomiya couple is elderly, given their health conditions at the time and the premiums, they could have easily gotten a life insurance policy worth around 200 thousand dollars. Shoko Ichinomiya might have been in poor health now, but that only started about six months ago, so ten months ago, they could have renewed the policy.

However, that made it seem like the connection between this insurance policy and the current incident was weak. If he really needed the money, he would have killed her long before ten

months had passed. Or maybe he got tired of taking care of her and ended up committing murder, but... Either way, there wasn't enough to consider him a suspect at this point.

"Can we move on?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Alright, next. Tomoyasu Ichinomiya. He's Akiyuki Ichinomiya's younger brother."

"So that makes him Shoko Ichinomiya's brother-in-law by marriage."

"That's right. He's 65 years old. We've actually met him once before."

"…Really? I don't recall at all… When was that?"

"When we were in the bath. Remember when you and Ujigami were causing a ruckus, and some guy complained? That was him."

"…Oh, that guy."

I remembered. He was the one who told us to keep it down when I gave Ujigami a roundhouse kick in the open-air bath.

He was a fairly large, imposing guy with a somewhat authoritative air, but he backed down pretty quickly when I gave him a little scare. A classic example of someone who's all bark and no bite.

"I've got some good news for you: this guy's a wastrel. He's been relying on his brother's money to live it up since he was young. And now, I hear he's in debt to the tune of around 650 thousand dollars. Apparently, he got duped by a woman into becoming a guarantor, and then she ran off. With no way out, he started taking care of Shoko Ichinomiya, who was in poor health, to beg for some pocket money."

"Well, that certainly makes him a good candidate for being framed as the culprit… But the motive is tricky."

Kageno tilted his head at my words, but then quickly seemed to remember the rules of inheritance.

"Oh, right. Even if someone dies, a brother-in-law can't inherit the estate."

"Exactly. As it stands, the only ones who can inherit Shoko Ichinomiya's estate are her husband and daughter. Unless we find a will that says otherwise, there's no point in him killing Shoko Ichinomiya."

"Yeah, that’s how inheritance works, isn’t it?"

"So, what’s next?"

"Got it. Next is the victim’s primary doctor, Dr. Shozo Kasai. You probably don’t know this, but he was staying at the inn at the time of the incident. And get this, he’s another prime suspect.

He used to be a wealthy doctor running a large hospital, but when it came out that he was hiding a medical error, the hospital went bankrupt, and now he’s broke.

He’s 52 years old. Not exactly young, and given that the reason he lost his patients was due to a cover-up of a medical mistake, it’s been tough for him to find another job. In the end, he relied on an old connection and got hired by Shoko Ichinomiya as her primary doctor."

"So what? Even if he could be a suspect, it’s just because he’s broke. He’s in the same boat as the younger brother — unless a will surfaces, it’s useless. What’s next?"

I waved my hand dismissively, urging him to continue.

"…You know, I get that you’re feeling down because Yukina isn’t here, but could you at least try to pay attention?"

"Shut up and get on with it. The client’s orders."

"Tch. Fine, next. Mayu Nioka, your client’s wife.

She’s 32 years old and works as a fashion designer. Seems like a real go-getter. Unfortunately for you, she seems to have no connection to this case. There’s no sign of any rift in her relationship with her mother, and more importantly, her alibi checks out."

"I heard she wasn’t at the inn last night because of some urgent work. You’re sure her alibi is solid?"

"Yeah. From around 3 PM yesterday until this morning, she was at her workplace with several colleagues. Of course, if all those colleagues are lying, that’s a different story."

"I doubt they’d go that far."

Besides, I couldn’t imagine a daughter killing her own mother without a significant motive. And I didn’t think a woman who was called in for urgent work and worked through the night would be in financial trouble either.

"This next one’s the last. I looked into it just in case — it’s the owner of this inn. His name’s Kotaro Igarashi, you know, the guy with the barcode haircut. Apparently, this inn’s struggling financially. He’s known the victim for quite some time."

"I see, so it wouldn’t be strange for him to be interested in her inheritance."

But he was still an outsider, which means he had no right to inherit.

"Well, that’s everything I managed to find out today."

Getting this much done in half a day was probably pretty quick.

However, in the end, there wasn’t a single piece of information that directly pointed to the culprit. It looked like I’d just have to prepare to counter the prosecution’s arguments in court, as usual. Well, I guess that was par for the course.

That old lady who was the victim sure was surrounded by an odd bunch: a wastrel brother-in-law, a husband increasingly obsessed with his hobbies, a bankrupt doctor, and a son-in-law who got laid off.

"Is there anything else you noticed?"

"If there was, I would’ve told you already. I’m exhausted from running around for half the day. I’m going to take a bath."

"Fine, fine."

Just as Kageno was about to change into his yukata, he suddenly stopped and turned back to me.

"Oh, by the way, Yamashika, there was one thing I did realize."

"Oh? What’s that?"

"I just happened to see it in the documents. It’s about that old lady, Shoko Ichinomiya, who got killed."

"Yeah?"

"Her birthday was yesterday."

"Huh."

So, she was killed on her birthday.

"That’s a strange coincidence. So? Does it have anything to do with the insurance maturing, or with this case?"

"No, that’s all."

"…"

I felt like an idiot for taking him seriously, even for a second.

第四章
時の氏神

Chapter 4: Ujigami’s Time

December 10th, 10:01 AM, District Courtroom Number 1

"All rise for Judge Ikegami's entrance!"

The court clerk's command echoed through the courtroom.

It had been two days since Koji Nioka was arrested. The stage had quickly shifted to this preliminary hearing.

This trial was different from the others in several ways.

First, the location was different. Well, that was to be expected — jurisdiction changes when you move to another prefecture.

We were at a courthouse about a 45-minute drive from Abuku Town. While it was slightly smaller than the courthouse in my city, the interior of the courtroom was predictably the same. The prosecution and defense seats faced each other, with the witness stand in the middle, and in front were the judge’s bench and the jury box. Toward the back, the spectator seats were about 80% full, and nearly everyone sitting there was sending glances my way. As if I was such a rare sight.

And, of course, this time, the usual goddess of victory who would always be by my side — Yukina — wasn't here. I could see Kageno in the spectator seats, but the little brat was nowhere to be found. It was kind of dispiriting, really. Just when I was about to shine.

However, this time, in exchange, there was a goddess present for my client. She was standing by the railing that separated the spectator seats from the defense side.

"It’s about to start. Leave the rest to me and go ahead and take your seat."

When I said that, the woman politely bowed her head.

"I understand. Mr. Yamashika, I’m counting on you to take care of my husband. I believe he’s innocent. Good luck!"

The woman’s name was Mayu Nioka. She was the wife of my client. She was supposedly over thirty, but her well-proportioned figure could have made her a model. Her hair was short, giving off the impression of a career woman.

"Hehe, she’s a fine woman, isn’t she?"

My client, who was about to be tried for murder, said with a stupid grin on his face. I felt like smacking him.

"…The trial's about to start. You should get serious and stand up."

I somehow managed to suppress my inner anger and say that.

Honestly, whether it's Ujigami or this guy, women in this world sure have no eye for men.

Soon, a middle-aged judge entered and plopped down into the judge's seat.

I recognized him as Judge Ryo Ikegami, as we had met once before when I filed a motion for Nioka's bail. He was a bespectacled, slightly overweight middle-aged man. He probably had a friendly demeanor when he wasn't working, but in the courtroom, he tried to maintain whatever little authority he could by keeping a stern expression on his face.

"Everyone, please be seated," he said, though his voice lacked much authority.

"We will begin the preliminary hearing now. However, before we start…"

He turned his head toward me, and as if on cue, everyone else in the courtroom did the same.

"Counsel, may I ask you something?"

"Y-Yes, what is it?"

"If my eyes don't deceive me, it looks like you're wearing… a yukata?"

The spectators who had been glancing at me earlier now openly stared, no longer feeling the need to be discreet.

Yes, I was indeed wearing a yukata. It wasn't that I was trying to be eccentric or stand out. Who on earth packs a three-piece suit for a hot spring trip? That's all there was to it. My one-night, two-day trip had already been extended to four days, and I had no extra clothes.

"Rest assured, Your Honor. I can guarantee that your eyes are not deceiving you."

I had no reason to be nervous, so I answered confidently with a smug look.

"I appreciate that. But, Counsel, did you not have any other appropriate attire?"

"I did not."

"I see."

The judge nodded simply.

"Then let’s proceed with the hearing."

"W-Wait a moment!"

It was Prosecutor Taki who hastily interrupted.

I had only met him once yesterday as well. His full name was Makoto Taki. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with a sharp face, but his belly was already round and plump. However, despite that, he seemed to have plenty of energy left for his age. Perhaps it was because he was up against a famous lawyer like me that he seemed unusually eager from the moment we first met.

He was my opponent in this case, but like the judge, I wasn’t sure what to make of him. Incidentally, I once called him "Makopuff" — a nickname combining his name with his round belly — and he got quite angry.

"Your Honor, isn’t it a bit inappropriate for a Defense counsel to conduct a hearing that could determine a person’s life in a yukata? Isn’t that somewhat lacking in sincerity?"

"Oh? Are you saying that wearing a yukata automatically calls into question one’s sincerity?"

I responded nonchalantly, and Makopuff’s eyebrows shot up.

"T-That’s not what I’m saying! In private, you can wear whatever you like, but this is a courtroom — a place where order and fairness are paramount. Such casual attire is—"

"But, Counsel has said he doesn’t have any other clothes," the judge interjected, cutting off Taki’s words before they could drag on.

But that response didn’t seem to sit well with Prosecutor Taki, who gave me a look that clearly said, "There’s no way that’s true."

I ignored his glare and said, "Unfortunately, Prosecutor Makopuff—"

"Who are you calling Makopuff?!"

"Ah, my apologies. Let me rephrase that. Unfortunately, Prosecutor Taki, I always give my all to protect my clients. Unlike you, my motivation doesn’t waver over something as trivial as attire."

"Grr…"

Prosecutor Taki's face twisted. The fun of teasing prosecutors didn't change, even in a different courthouse.

"And besides, Prosecutor Taki, the fact that I'm wearing a yukata actually works in your favor. If, by some chance, you end up humiliated and defeated in this trial, you can openly claim that you couldn't focus on the hearing because of my yukata — that it was all the yukata's fault. If there are people out there who share your mindset, I'm sure they'll sympathize with you. You can blame the yukata for all your failures, regardless of your actual abilities. Sounds pretty convenient, doesn't it?"

As a bitter chuckle rose from the spectators, Taki's face twisted even more, by about 30%.

"Now, now, both of you, please calm down," the judge interceded, albeit a step late as usual.

"In any case, it's true that the attire is somewhat unconventional, but I don't believe the outcome of the hearing will be influenced by the defense counsel's clothing. Arguing over something like this is a waste of time, and I'd like to get on with the hearing. Prosecutor Taki, may we proceed?"

"…Understood."

Reluctantly, Taki nodded. After clearing his throat, he spoke in a now confident tone.

"The prosecution would like to call its first witness, Officer Kinoshita, who was stationed in Abuku Town at the time of the incident."

Officer Kinoshita, dressed neatly in his uniform, took the witness stand. It would've been amusing if he had shown up in a yukata too.

"Please state your name and occupation," the judge instructed.

"Suguru Kinoshita, police officer."

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"Yes, I swear."

"Very well. Prosecutor Taki, you may begin."

With the formalities out of the way, the questioning began.

"On the night of the 7th of this month, you were on duty at the police box in Abuku Town when you were visited by a local resident, correct?"

"Yes."

"Can you recall the exact time this happened?"

"It was a little past 8 PM on December 7th."

"And what was the reason that resident visited you?"

"They said they had found a dead body and wanted me to come immediately."

"You went to the scene right away, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. I went with another colleague."

"What time did you arrive at the scene?"

"I remember it being around 8:30 PM."

"Please describe the scene in detail. What kind of location were you led to?"

"It was an old wooden storage shed — or perhaps it's easier to call it a barn. While Abuku Town is bustling with many hot spring inns now, it was a small farming village until not too long ago. Many of the old buildings from that time still remain and are used as storage sheds."

"What did you find in that barn?"

"The body of an elderly woman who had hanged herself."

Here, Prosecutor Taki paused for a few seconds, giving the jurors and spectators time to absorb the information.

Whenever a body is mentioned, the prosecution always creates this moment of suspense. For the jurors, it's likely their first experience, and the prosecution undoubtedly wants to leave an impact. I can understand that, but having seen this same routine over and over, I find the theatrics a bit tiresome. It would be nice if they considered my feelings for once.

"After discovering the body, what did you do?"

"First, I called for backup from headquarters. Then I found out that the person who had reported the incident was actually an employee of the inn where the victim had been staying. I asked that person to call the victim's family, who were also staying at the inn, to identify the body. As a result, we confirmed that the victim was a woman named Shoko Ichinomiya. After that, my colleague and I stood guard to ensure no one touched the body until backup arrived."

"Thank you. No further questions. Cross-examination?"

Hmm. It seems they intended to avoid any mention of Ujigami. Well, considering that wasn't an official autopsy, it's only natural the prosecution would consider it inappropriate to bring up in court.

I stood up and began my usual cross-examination. I understood the prosecution's intentions, but it was inconvenient for me if they didn't bring up Ujigami.

"Officer Kinoshita, what time did the backup arrive?"

"…Around 8 AM the next day."

There was a slight hesitation before he answered.

"Oh, the next morning? Considering you arrived at the scene just after 8 PM the previous day, that means nearly 12 hours passed in between. That's quite a long time, isn't it?"

"T-That's because, unfortunately, the roads around Abuku Town freeze completely at night during this season, making them impassable. That's why the backup didn't arrive until the following day…"

When I glanced to the side, I saw that the jurors seemed satisfied with that explanation. As locals who lived in a cold region, they were likely familiar with the dangers of icy roads. If this had been a jury from my hometown, they probably wouldn't have imagined that icy roads alone could delay the police by 12 hours. Instead, they'd likely suspect police incompetence first.

"I see. So the delay in backup was understandable.

But that means you spent the entire night just standing guard, leaving the body unattended?"

"W-Well, um, how should I put it…"

Officer Kinoshita looked toward Prosecutor Taki for help.

Prosecutor Taki, wearing a bitter expression, gave a heavy nod, as if saying there was no other choice.

Kinoshita let out a relieved breath and continued,

"Yes, it's true that all I could do was stand guard until backup arrived. However, as I mentioned earlier, the innkeeper told me something. Apparently, there was a medical examiner staying at their inn."

Hmm. He brought up Ujigami rather easily. It seems Prosecutor Taki anticipated this.

"Officer Kinoshita, could you explain what exactly a medical examiner does?"

"Yes. Simply put, a medical examiner is a doctor who performs autopsies on people who have died from causes other than clear illnesses, in order to determine the cause of death. If it turns out the death was due to something like murder, that's when we, the police, begin a full investigation.

This is part of the medical examiner system, which is in place in several prefectures. Our prefecture adopted this system recently, and in cases like this, where a body is found hanging in what appears to be a suicide, the medical examiner is called to determine the exact cause of death."

"I see, thank you for the clear explanation. So you learned that a medical examiner was staying at a nearby inn. What did you do next?"

"When I reported this to headquarters, they coordinated with various departments, and though it was a bit unusual, it was decided that we would ask the medical examiner to perform a preliminary autopsy. The idea was that the sooner it's done, the better."

"What was the name of this medical examiner?"

"Uh… Dr. Kudoku Ujigami."

"Dr. Kudoku Ujigami, you say? That's quite an unusual name. And in the end, this medical examiner conducted the autopsy?"

"Well, yes. But since the body couldn't be moved until the forensic team arrived, it was only a preliminary external examination."

With that, I had set the stage to call Ujigami later.

"Thank you. No further questions."

"Prosecutor Taki, please call your next witness."

"The next witness is Dr. Atsushi Honjo, who performed the judicial autopsy."

"Objection, just a moment, please."

I stood up, raising my hand.

Prosecutor Taki looked genuinely annoyed.

"What is it, Counsel?"

"The previous witness testified that the body was examined by Dr. Kudoku Ujigami, a medical examiner, didn't he? I believe that person should be called to the stand first."

"I was wondering about that myself," said the judge. "What do you think, Prosecutor?"

"Your Honor, Mr. Ujigami only performed a superficial examination of the body. He did not conduct an actual autopsy.

As you know, when a person dies, depending on the circumstances, their body becomes stiff, blood pools, and the skin changes color over time. That's why it's crucial to conduct an autopsy — or at least a preliminary examination — as soon as possible.

Therefore, it's true that Mr. Ujigami conducted a preliminary examination before the police could arrive. However, as Officer Kinoshita testified, this was only a temporary measure. The body wasn't moved, and it certainly wasn't a formal autopsy.

Once the police arrived, we concluded that the victim was more likely murdered than committed suicide. When there's suspicion of homicide, rather than relying on a medical examiner's autopsy, a judicial autopsy is conducted under the supervision of the prosecution to determine the exact cause of death.

Since we intend to establish the cause of death for the defendant, we believe it's appropriate to have Dr. Honjo, who performed the more detailed autopsy, testify."

Damn that Prosecutor Taki, dragging out his long-winded explanation. He could've just said, "The person who examined the body in more detail can provide better testimony," but no, he had to stretch it out. It seemed his title of prosecutor wasn't just for show.

"I see, that makes sense. What do you think, Counsel?"

"Very well. I'll withdraw my objection for now."

Once again, Prosecutor Taki looked truly displeased. He must have realized that when I said I'd withdraw the objection for now, I fully intended to bring it up again later.

In the end, it wasn't Ujigami who took the stand, but a forensic pathologist named Honjo.

He wore glasses, had a stern expression, hollow cheeks, close-cropped hair, and a thin, pale complexion. He looked the exact opposite of Ujigami, someone who seemed rather unhealthy. However, for someone whose job involved examining dead bodies, he certainly looked more the part than Ujigami.

"Dr. Honjo, you performed the judicial autopsy on the victim, correct?"

"Yes."

Honjo, the forensic pathologist, answered in a cold voice that matched his appearance.

"Please testify about the results of that autopsy."

"In conclusion, the cause of death was asphyxiation due to strangulation."

"Strangulation — so, in other words, it wasn't a case of suicide by hanging, correct?"

"Yes, it was homicide."

"Could you explain the process that led you to that conclusion?"

"Certainly. To be honest, it was clear at a glance that this was not a suicide but a homicide, even before the autopsy."

Honjo adjusted his glasses lightly with his middle finger, a motion that seemed almost practiced.

"When a person is strangled to death, numerous changes appear on the surface of the face. Strangulation obstructs the flow of blood, causing blood to pool in the face, making it swollen and red. Additionally, the small blood vessels in the mucous membranes of the eyes and mouth often burst, leaving tiny blood spots."

"The victim's body showed these signs of strangulation?"

"Indeed."

"But don't those signs also appear in cases of suicide by hanging? After all, the neck is still being constricted in both cases."

"No, it's different. While the characteristics I mentioned earlier almost always appear in cases of strangulation, things change when it comes to a suicide by hanging.

In a typical hanging suicide, the victim puts a rope around their neck and jumps from a height, with their body weight acting as the force that tightens the rope.

This is referred to as a typical hanging. There are instances where the feet touch the ground or the rope isn't properly positioned, which are called atypical hangings, but in this case, the victim was in a state of typical hanging.

In a typical hanging, the victim's neck is subjected to several tens of kilograms of force all at once.

The human body has a peculiar characteristic: when the neck is suddenly subjected to such intense force, the vagus nerve and carotid sinus, which are connected to the brainstem, are instantly — how should I put it — disabled, causing cardiac arrest and immediate death."

It was a highly technical explanation. I had heard something similar from Ujigami earlier, so I could just about follow it, but most of the jurors had expressions that suggested they were only half-understanding.

Noticing this, Honjo readjusted his glasses and added, without a hint of panic.

"Let me put it another way. When a person's neck is strangled in the usual way, the immediate cause of death is oxygen deprivation. However, in a typical hanging, where the neck is suddenly subjected to several tens of kilograms of force, death occurs due to cardiac arrest rather than oxygen deprivation.

In this case, the victim placed a rope securely around her neck, jumped from a platform about fifty centimeters high, and was found hanging twenty to thirty centimeters above the ground.

This is precisely what we would call a typical hanging. In such cases, the victim almost certainly dies instantly from cardiac arrest before oxygen deprivation sets in. Naturally, once the heart stops, blood circulation throughout the body ceases as well, so the symptoms I mentioned earlier that appear in strangulation — such as a flushed face due to pooled blood — would not occur, and instead, the face would be pale."

"I see. But in this case, even though the victim was found in a state of typical hanging, you said her face wasn't pale but was, in fact, flushed, correct?"

"Yes."

"So, based on these signs, you concluded that this was not a suicide, but a murder staged to look like one?"

"Exactly."

"I see. So you believe the victim was strangled by some other means first, and then hung afterward to make it look like a suicide?"

"Objection — leading the witness."

It wasn't a particularly strong objection, but I said it just to be annoying. There was no need to pound the table to emphasize it.

"Prosecutor Taki, would you kindly rephrase your question?" suggested the judge.

Prosecutor Taki pressed his temples and rephrased, "Alright, let me rephrase. Dr. Honjo, the victim was found in a state of typical hanging, correct?"

"Yes."

"But based on the various marks left on the body, it was a staged scene, right?"

"That's what I believe."

"At the same time, it's certain that the victim's cause of death was strangulation, correct?"

"Yes, the features that indicate this were prominently displayed during the autopsy."

"So, the victim was strangled by someone before being hung, correct?"

"Yes, that's the conclusion I've reached."

Having heard this, Prosecutor Taki nodded with satisfaction.

"Thank you. Now, as a forensic expert, Dr. Honjo, could you give us your opinion on how the victim was killed?"

"Certainly. There was one other notable feature on the body. There was only one mark on the neck — what we call a ligature mark. This suggests that the victim's neck was strangled twice in the same spot with the same rope.

Based on this mark and the other observations I've mentioned, I believe the perpetrator likely placed a rope around the victim's neck, hoisted them up somehow, and killed them. When someone is killed in this manner, the rope would naturally pass under the victim's chin and behind the ears. This is the same position where marks would appear in a hanging, so if the scene were staged as it was in this case, only one ligature mark would remain on the neck.

Moreover, when a rope is placed around the victim's neck and they are hoisted up by human force, it's unlikely that the neck would be subjected to the same amount of force as in a typical hanging where several tens of kilograms of force are applied all at once. This explains why, despite the victim being found in a state of typical hanging, their face was flushed with pooled blood."

According to what I heard from Ujigami, if a rope is placed around the victim's neck and they are strangled by being lifted piggyback-style, it would leave the same kind of marks as a hanging, but it seems the prosecution didn't adopt that theory.

"Thank you. No further questions. You may cross-examine the witness."

"Just one thing."

I stood up quickly.

To be honest, with all this scientific testimony, there wasn't much room for rebuttal. But I would do what I could.

"Dr. Honjo, you testified that there was only one ligature mark on the victim, meaning that the victim was strangled twice in the same spot with the same rope, correct?"

"Yes."

"However, if my memory serves, it's possible for no ligature marks to be left if, for example, a soft, wide towel is used to strangle someone, correct?"

"Uh, yes. That can happen in some cases."

"So, there's a possibility that someone strangled the victim with a towel and then staged the scene to look like a hanging, right?"

"Well, yes, that's possible, but I don't think it's very likely."

"…Why not?"

"Generally speaking, when someone strangles a person, they tend to use a lot of force. I don't think anyone would try to strangle someone with a light touch.

In that case, while it's true that strangulation with a soft cloth might not leave any marks, the likelihood of some form of evidence being left behind is still higher. For instance, the bones in the neck or those connected to it could break. The victim was quite elderly and considerably frail. Under such circumstances, it would be extremely difficult to strangle someone without leaving any external traces of injury."

"But, the possibility isn't completely zero, is it?"

"…Well, yes. If we consider all possibilities."

"And the court is precisely the place where all possibilities should be considered. No further questions."

I wasn't entirely convinced myself, but I kept that thought to myself.

"The next witness is Mr. Shozo Kasai, the victim's primary physician."

Here we go. The primary physician. Is it just me, or does the term "primary physician" always make someone seem suspicious?

I knew most of his background from Kageno's investigation, but this was the first time I actually saw him in person. He seemed to have been a fairly successful doctor in the past, with a stocky build and a plump face, but now, burdened with debt, he seemed more worn down, with deep wrinkles etched into his face and a graying mustache under his nose.

"You were the personal doctor of the victim, Shoko Ichinomiya, correct?"

"Yes. She was elderly and suffered from various ailments, including back pain, and I was responsible for her treatment."

"I see. Then please testify about your actions on the night of December 7th, the night of the incident."

"Understood. Well, I usually conduct a regular check-up on Ms. Ichinomiya after dinner, starting a little past 7 PM. That night was no different. I finished her check-up around 7:30 PM and returned to my room."

"So, the victim was alive at 7:30 PM?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"And how was the victim at that time?"

"How she was…? What do you mean?"

"Was there anything unusual about her?"

"Oh, I see. No, she seemed a bit down, perhaps because her back pain had worsened recently, but that was about it."

"Just to confirm, the last time you saw the victim was around 7:30 PM, and she was alive at that time, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"No further questions. Defense counsel Yamashika, your turn."

"No cross-examination."

The next witness called was a young woman.

"Please state your name and occupation," the judge said.

"Keiko Aida. I work at the Utakata Inn."

Another unfamiliar face. I hadn't even heard the name before.

After the usual formalities, Prosecutor Taki began his questioning.

"You work at the same inn where the defendant and the victim were staying, correct?"

"Yeees."

For some reason, she stretched out the last syllable of her answer.

"Your duties include delivering meals to the guest rooms and collecting the dishes afterward, correct?"

"Yeees, that's right."

"Please recall the events of December 7th, the night of the incident. Did you know that the defendant was staying at the inn that day?"

"Of coooourse. I make it a point to remember the names of the guests staying with us."

"Was the defendant staying alone?"

"Weeell, yes. Technically, they were supposed to stay with their spouse for a few days, but the wife had to leave that day due to some urgent matter, so the defendant was alone."

"You delivered a meal to the defendant's room, didn't you?"

"Yeees."

…This was somehow really draining.

"What time was that?"

"A little past 7 PM."

"Who was in the room at that time?"

"Mr. Nioka — oh, I mean, the defendant was alone."

"And what time did you go to collect the dishes?"

"A little after 8 PM… around 8:15, I think."

"Was there anyone in the room at that time?"

"No, there was no one."

"So, the defendant was in the room a little after 7 PM, but not after 8 PM — is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Where exactly was the defendant's room located in the inn?"

"It was the southeastern-most room on the second floor."

"And who was occupying the room directly below?"

"Shoko Ichinomiya… oh, um, the victim and her husband."

"So, the defendant was staying in the room directly above the victim's room?"

"That's correct."

The courtroom fell silent. Once again, Prosecutor Taki was deliberately creating a pause.

The defendant was alone in the room directly above the victim — he wanted the audience to take their time and think about the implications.

"Thank you. No further questions."

"Defense counsel Yamashika, your cross-examination."

Prompted by the judge, I stood up and began the cross-examination.

"You mentioned that one of your duties is delivering meals to the rooms, correct?"

"Yes, I did."

"So, naturally, you go around to many rooms, right?"

"Yeees."

"Roughly how many rooms do you visit in a day?"

"Um — around twenty to thirty, I think."

"Then, how is it that you remember the exact time you delivered the meal to the defendant's room, which is just one of those many rooms?"

"We make a schedule in advance based on the guests' requests for meal times."

I see.

"Understood. Just for reference, did you also deliver dinner to the victim and her spouse?"

"Yes, that's part of my job too."

"And what time was that?"

"The Ichinomiyas had their dinner a bit earlier, around 6 PM. I went to collect their dishes before 7 PM. Oh, and yes, both of them were in the room at those times."

Thanks for answering before I even had to ask.

"...No further questions."

"The next witness is the victim's husband, Akiyuki Ichinomiya."

So, that was their next move. Calling the victim's husband to the stand likely means they were aiming for testimony about the relationship between the victim and the defendant, as well as to evoke sympathy from the jurors. The prosecution was finally getting serious.

Akiyuki Ichinomiya was over seventy years old, yet he still stood tall and straight, a lively old man. Now, though, his face was filled with anger, and he occasionally shot glares at my client as he took the stand.

Come to think of it, this was also my first time seeing this witness in person.

"Let's get straight to the point, Mr. Ichinomiya. Please testify about your relationship with the defendant."

"Alright."

He nodded, then suddenly started coughing.

"Excuse me. I suffer from asthma.

Koji — no, the defendant, is my son-in-law. You see, I married Shoko about six years ago. Both she and I had lost our previous spouses, and we found solace in each other's company, so we decided to remarry.

Shoko already had a daughter from her previous marriage. The defendant is her husband.

Though he's my son-in-law by marriage, we were so happy when my daughter got married. My wife and I used to talk about how we couldn't die until we saw our grandchildren… And yet—"

Akiyuki Ichinomiya had closed his eyes and hung his head, but suddenly, he lifted his face and glared at the defendant.

"—And yet, that's how he repays us! This ungrateful wretch!!"

His voice of rage echoed through the courtroom. The defendant, who had just been called ungrateful, trembled.

"Please calm down, Mr. Ichinomiya," said Prosecutor Taki.

"The defendant is under suspicion, but he has not yet been convicted. He's still undergoing trial, isn't that right, Defense counsel Yamashika?"

"…"

I saw no need to reply, so I stayed silent. Prosecutor Taki shot me a bitter smile before turning back to the witness.

"Mr. Ichinomiya, may I continue with the questioning?"

"*Cough, cough*, yes, I apologize. I lost my composure…"

"No, it's understandable.

Let's continue with the questions. You and your wife had been staying at the Utakata Inn for quite a long time, hadn't you?"

"Yes."

"And why was that?"

"My wife's health started to deteriorate about six months ago. So, we decided to stay at the inn for some hot spring therapy. We chose that particular inn because my wife used to own the rights to it. Although she transferred those rights after she got older."

"It wasn't a coincidence that the defendant was staying at the same inn, was it?"

"Of course not. Recently, my wife's condition had been slowly but steadily worsening, and she had become quite depressed. So, to cheer her up, we thought it might be nice to see our daughter and her husband looking happy, and we invited them to join us..."

At this point, his voice began to tremble.

"Who would've thought it would turn out like this..."

The sound of his coughing and sobs echoed through the courtroom.

"My sympathies," Prosecutor Taki said, his words ringing hollow.

"Thank you. …Please, continue with your questions."

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to. Now, was it a coincidence that the defendant was staying in the room directly above yours?"

"No, it wasn't. The room we were staying in, on the southeast side of the inn, had the best view. Naturally, the view from the second floor was even better, but unfortunately, my wife was in no condition to climb stairs.

So, out of consideration for her, we arranged for our daughter and her husband to stay in the best room."

"And on the night of the incident, December 7th, you were staying in the same room as the victim, correct?"

"Of course."

"Then, where were you around 7:30 that evening?"

"I was in another room at the inn."

"What were you doing there?"

"I have a hobby of keeping fish. So, even while staying at the inn, I rented another room, the cheapest one, to keep my aquarium. As Dr. Kasai, the primary physician, mentioned earlier, my wife had a regular check-up around 7:30 PM every day."

He paused to cough again.

"E-Excuse me. In any case, I didn't want to be in the way while my wife was having her check-up, so I always went to tend to the fish after 7 PM."

"Was the defendant aware of this routine?"

"Yes, I believe he was. He had even helped me feed the fish once, so he should've known."

"And what time did you return to the room?"

"Actually, I never returned to my room that day."

"Why not?"

"That day, while I was taking care of the fish, one of the inn's staff came to get me…"

Ichinomiya's voice gradually grew quieter.

"They told me… that my wife had been found in the shed…"

He sobbed again.

"And why didn't you return to the room at all?"

"The police asked that no one enter the room where my wife had been staying until it was confirmed whether it was a suicide or not. I was given another room for the night and stayed there."

"No further questions. Defense counsel, your cross-examination?"

"I have no questions."

"The next witness is Detective Kusaka."

The man who took the stand was a tough-looking detective, reminiscent of a Yakuza enforcer, reminding me of Detective Inaba. However, his body was lean and tightly toned, like that of a boxer who had shed weight.

"Detective Kusaka, you were the one who arrested the defendant, correct?"

"Yes, I was."

"Please testify about the events leading up to the arrest."

"Certainly. The autopsy concluded that the victim had been strangled to death and that the scene had been staged to look like a suicide.

Although the victim reportedly often took short walks for exercise, she was in poor health and had never gone out alone at night, especially in the dark.

The last time the victim was seen alive was around 7:30 PM on December 7th, and her body was discovered hanging approximately thirty minutes later. Even if we assume it took a minimal amount of time to stage the scene, it's clear that the victim was strangled sometime between 7:30 and 8:00 PM.

We investigated everyone who was at the inn during that time. As a result, we found that fewer than ten people had any connection to the victim. Further investigation revealed that out of those people, only one had no alibi, stood to gain from the victim's death, and most importantly, had the ability to strangle the victim and stage the scene to look like a suicide."

"That person is present in this courtroom, correct?"

"Yes, they are."

"Can you point them out?"

"He's right there."

There was no need to mention who he pointed at.

"Detective Kusaka, please explain the situation in order.

You mentioned that there were several people at the inn who knew the victim?"

"Yes. Besides the primary physician who testified earlier, there were also some of the victim's relatives and a few of the inn's staff."

"And the only person without an alibi was the defendant, correct?"

"That's right. The staff were all working, and the others were seen by someone else at the hot springs or during meals."

"Good. Now, you also investigated the defendant's motive for killing the victim, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Please testify about what you discovered."

"Certainly. I think most people have already realized this, but the victim had a considerable amount of wealth. During her life, she donated a portion of her assets to various welfare organizations, but a significant inheritance would still remain for her family after her death. Of course, this includes the defendant's wife, who is the victim's daughter.

We also found out that the defendant was recently laid off and now spends his days idly, relying on his wife's income and unemployment benefits."

That was a harsh way to put it. But even if I objected by saying, "Objection! The defendant is currently looking for work and isn't just idly passing the time," it wouldn't change the fact that he's unemployed, and his appearance wouldn't exactly inspire confidence. It was better to stay silent and avoid making things worse.

"Now, how do you believe the defendant killed the victim?"

"Based on the evidence, I believe it went something like this:

The method itself was simple. As mentioned in previous testimony, during the time of the victim's death — between 7:30 and 8:00 PM — the defendant was alone in the room directly above the victim.

The defendant likely called out to the victim from the second-floor window. He might've said something like he dropped something outside and asked her to pick it up. The victim would then have leaned out of the first-floor window.

From there, it was straightforward. The defendant lowered a rope with a loop already tied into it, hooked it around the victim's neck, and pulled hard. As Dr. Honjo testified earlier, when a rope is pulled around the neck, it will always pass under the chin and behind the ears. This is the same as in a suicidal hanging, so even if the scene is staged, only one set of strangulation marks will be found.

And most importantly, unlike in typical hangings, where a sudden force is applied, the victim's face would've turned red and swollen due to the gradual pressure.

Afterward, the defendant climbed out of the window, carried the victim's body to the shed where it was later discovered, and staged the scene to look like a suicide."

"Thank you. No further questions."

I see. So that was how the police had pieced it together.

It was certainly persuasive. The proof of that was in the fact that none of the jurors, or even any of the people in the gallery, looked the slightest bit skeptical.

"Defense counsel, do you have any cross-examination?"

At the judge's prompt, I stood up.

"Yes, just a few questions.

Detective Kusaka, if, for example, the victim's neck was wrapped with a rope, and the person doing the strangling pulled while standing back-to-back with the victim, wouldn't the strangulation marks end up in the same position as if the victim had hanged herself?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"In that case, wouldn't it mean that anyone else could have had the opportunity to commit the murder, not just the defendant who was in the room directly above?"

"No, that's not possible."

"W-Why not?"

"From the room where the victim was found to the shed where her body was discovered, it would have taken at least ten minutes to go back and forth. And when you add in the time it took to stage the scene as if she hanged herself, it would have required about fifteen minutes.

As I mentioned earlier, we investigated the alibis of everyone who was at the inn between 7:30 PM and 8:00 PM. As a result, the defendant was the only one without an alibi. That's the whole story."

I see. From the prosecution's point of view, it didn't really matter whether the method was lowering a rope from the second floor or strangling the victim from behind — it was all the same. But still, I couldn't believe they could arrest the defendant solely based on the lack of an alibi...

No, that's probably why they emphasized the fact that the room was directly above the victim's, to leave an impression on the jurors that the defendant was the perpetrator. Or perhaps they have another decisive witness lined up after this...

For now, I'd better ask one more question and then step back.

"Lastly, Detective Kusaka, I heard that the victim was quite elderly and had a considerable amount of assets. Did she leave behind any sort of will?"

"No. We thoroughly searched both the inn and the victim's residence, but we found nothing that could be considered a will."

"…No further questions."

Hmm. So, there was no will. That eliminates the motive for a few of the suspects I had in mind.

"Very well. Prosecutor Taki, your next witness."

"The prosecution's final witness will be Mr. Tomoyasu Ichinomiya."

Tomoyasu Ichinomiya. He was the younger brother of Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who testified earlier.

And he was also the coward who picked a fight with me in the outdoor bath at the Utakata Inn, only to sneak away like a rat.

People often use the literary expression "a child at heart" to describe adults who retain a youthful spirit. This man, however, seemed to have literally aged into an old man while retaining the mind of a child. And I don't mean that in a good way — he just seemed naive and sheltered. Maybe it's because Kageno had already told me he had a dirty, money-grubbing personality, but I couldn't think of him in any positive light.

Prosecutor Taki first established that this witness was the younger brother of the victim's husband, and then began the main questioning.

"On the day of the incident, December 7th, you were staying at the Utakata Inn, just like the victim, correct?"

"Yes."

"And your room was next to the defendant's, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Then, could you tell us where you were and what you were doing around 7:30 PM on the 7th?"

"Well, I finished dinner shortly after 7:00 PM, and I watched TV until about 7:30. After that, I thought I'd go take a bath. Since I knew Mr. Nioka was alone in the room next door, after his wife had gone back home, I went to invite him to join me. But he ended up turning me down."

Hmm. I hadn't heard about this interaction before.

"Hey, Nioka."

I nudged Nioka, who was sitting next to me, and asked quietly.

"Y-Yes?"

"Is it true that he invited you to the bath?"

"Y-Yes. Now that you mention it, he did. But since I'd already taken a bath earlier that day, I declined…"

"I see."

I wanted to tell him to mention these things sooner, but in this particular instance, it was hard to say whether knowing about it beforehand would've been helpful. I should wait and see how Prosecutor Taki proceeded.

The questioning continued.

"After you invited the defendant to the bath and he declined, what did you do?"

"I headed to the bath alone. But when I got to the changing room, I realized I'd forgotten to bring a change of clothes, so I went back to my room.

However, I'm a bit of a scatterbrain, so I couldn't find my clothes right away even after returning to my room.

While I was looking for them, I happened to glance out the window, and I saw something."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw Mr. Nioka carrying my sister-in-law on his back."

A murmur spread through the courtroom.

I see. I'd heard there was a witness who saw something, but didn't know it was him.

This testimony was definitely damning — assuming it was true.

"In other words, you saw the defendant walking outside with the victim on his back?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Can you describe what you saw in more detail? Do you remember the exact time?"

"Yes, I caught a glimpse of the clock. It was around 7:40 PM."

"What was the victim’s condition at that time?"

"She was completely limp and showed no signs of movement."

"And what about the defendant’s demeanor while carrying her?"

"He looked suspicious, to say the least. Even though there were plenty of well-lit paths, he chose to take a dark, secluded route and seemed to be hurrying somewhere."

"Objection. The last part of that testimony is speculation on the witness’s part, not fact."

"Objection sustained. The last part of the testimony will be stricken from the record. Jurors, please disregard that portion of the witness’s statement."

"No further questions. Defense counsel, your cross-examination?"

So that was the angle they were taking.

This testimony was damning. The victim was last seen alive around 7:30 PM, and her body was found around 8:00 PM. If someone was seen carrying the limp victim during that time, it was hard not to think they were the killer.

However, while this testimony was indeed damning, it was also extremely convenient for me.

Nioka had claimed he was in his room the entire time. There was no way he could’ve been outside, carrying the victim down the street. Which means Tomoyasu Ichinomiya’s testimony was a lie. But why would he lie? There were only a few possible reasons. Either he mistook someone else for Nioka, he was deliberately lying to frame Nioka, or he was the real culprit.

The question was how to press him, but that was the part I enjoyed most. As usual, I fixed my gaze on the witness and began my cross-examination.

"Mr. Ichinomiya, let me ask you a few questions. After dinner, you went to the bath, then returned to your room because you forgot something, and that’s when you saw the defendant carrying the victim outside the window, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"First, could you establish your alibi between 7:30 and 8:00 PM on the day of the incident?"

"Sure, no problem."

Tomoyasu Ichinomiya nodded so readily that it almost caught me off guard.

"Like I said, I returned to my room around 7:40 PM. After that, I was in the bath until after 8:00 PM. I talked to a few people there, so they can vouch for my alibi."

"I'd like to add—"

Prosecutor Taki stood up.

"As Detective Kusaka testified earlier, we have already confirmed the alibis of everyone except the defendant, just to be thorough."

After saying that, he returned to his seat with an air of smug satisfaction.

I'd heard that several times already... If this witness had an alibi, then he was clearly not a suspect anymore.

Fine. I'd let Kageno handle that part of the investigation later. For now, I'd focus on discrediting this testimony.

"Understood, your alibi is sufficient.

Now, I'd like to ask about the moment you saw the person who resembled the defendant. How far away was that person from your window?"

"Hmm, let's see. It was from the second floor, so I'd say about fifteen meters."

That sounded about right. It was a distance where you could easily recognize someone's face if you knew them well.

"By the way, when you went to the bath, did you leave your window open?"

Tomoyasu Ichinomiya snorted.

"Of course not. It gets really cold around there at night. Leaving the window open would've been a disaster."

"So, naturally, when you returned to your room to retrieve your forgotten item, the window was still closed, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Don't you find that odd?"

"W-What do you mean?"

"It was very cold outside, wasn't it? If your window had been closed, it would've fogged up, right? Are you saying you could see outside through a fogged-up window?"

I didn't miss the momentary stiffness in the witness's face.

"N-No, of course it was fogged up. But even through the fogged window, I could vaguely see someone outside. That's why I wondered who it could be at that hour, so I opened the window, and there he was."

"The person who resembled the defendant, you mean?"

"Yes, exactly."

I grinned.

"You just admitted it yourself, didn't you? What you saw wasn't the defendant, but someone who resembled the defendant."

Tomoyasu Ichinomiya's face froze so hard you could almost hear it.

"W-Wait a minute, that's not what I meant! Y-Your Honor, wasn't that a leading question?"

"Yes, perhaps," the judge said in a gentle tone.

"But in cross-examination, leading questions are allowed to test the witness's bias."

"Wha — "

Ichinomiya blinked in bewilderment.

He was quite an entertaining witness.

"Mr. Ichinomiya, please focus your attention here, not on the judge. We're not done yet."

Ichinomiya bit his lip in frustration.

"F-Fine. What's next?"

"You mentioned that the person who resembled the defendant walked down a dark road, as if trying to avoid being seen, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And you claim you could see that from your room, even though you initially looked through a fogged window?"

"Y-Yes, I could see it."

"Don’t you find that strange?"

"W-What do you mean?"

"You’ve lived for several decades, haven’t you? Even putting aside the fogged window, don’t you know how things look when you try to see from a bright place into a dark one?"

"Uh... Well..."

"The human pupil naturally constricts in bright environments and dilates in dark ones to maintain visibility. In other words, the human eye isn’t designed to see well from a bright room into a dark outside.

So, even if you looked from a brightly lit room into the dimly lit outdoors, I don’t think you’d be able to see very clearly."

I could see the audience nodding slightly as if to say, "He's got a point."

"N-No, well, that’s true if the room I was in was bright, right? But that’s easily explained — I hadn’t turned on the lights in my room. That’s why I could see the dimly lit outside quite clearly."

I wonder if he realized how increasingly inconsistent his story was becoming.

"Oh really? Didn’t you say you returned to your room to retrieve something you’d forgotten? And that it took you a while to find it? So, you were searching for something in the dark without turning on the lights?"

"Y-Yes! It was something small, so I thought I’d find it right away!"

"Hmph, how ridiculous."

"W-What!?"

"Come on, think about it logically. You returned to a pitch-dark room, didn’t turn on the lights, and started searching for something? And then you claim you saw someone carrying the victim outside through a fogged window? Don’t you find that hard to believe?"

"O-Objection!"

As expected, Prosecutor Taki rose to his feet.

"The defense's questions are clearly inappropriate and intended to harass the witness! And calling it ridiculous—"

"Alright, alright, I'll withdraw the earlier question. There's no need for an answer."

I exaggeratedly shrugged, cutting off Taki's objection.

No matter how you look at it, it was highly improbable that this witness saw someone from inside his room. The testimony about someone resembling the defendant carrying the victim off somewhere was probably a fabrication. That was the only logical conclusion.

The real question was why this man would need to concoct such a story. There were only two possible reasons: either he was the culprit, or he had some reason to deliberately frame the defendant.

Well, I'd think about that later. For now, I'd just prove that listening to his testimony was a waste of time.

"You testified that before heading to the bath around 7:30 PM, you were having dinner, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Alright. Can you describe that meal in detail?"

"Objection, Your Honor," Prosecutor Taki stood up straight. "This question has no relevance to the case at hand."

It certainly seemed like Taki had a point. However, if this witness could accurately recall what he ate at the hot spring inn, it should reveal something crucial.

"Your Honor, I'm simply testing the witness's memory. If he can't remember what he ate, how could he possibly remember the face of someone he saw outside? This question should be allowed."

"…Very well," the judge nodded. "But please keep questions that stray from the main issue as brief as possible."

"Understood. Now, please answer. What did you have for dinner?"

"Well, if you insist on an answer…

It was mainly Japanese cuisine, so there was a chicken hot pot, sashimi, and some soup—"

"What about drinks?"

"I had a bottle of beer. …Oh."

There it is.

I feigned surprise.

"You drank a whole bottle of beer? So, you were intoxicated?"

"N-No, I went to the bath right after, so I didn't drink that much…"

"But you did drink a whole bottle of beer, correct?"

"T-That's true, but I don't get drunk from just one bottle of beer. I can handle my alcohol."

"I'm not interested in your personal tolerance. I know people who get drunk after just one glass of beer.

You drank alcohol. And not just a glass, but a whole bottle. That's enough that you wouldn't be able to drive a car. So, when you saw the person who resembled the defendant from the second floor, you were intoxicated, weren't you?"

"W-Well, maybe, but that amount isn't enough to get me drunk. My eyes weren't playing tricks on me, I definitely saw it!"

"Oh, is that so? No further questions. Goodbye."

"Prosecutor Taki, do you have any redirect?"

"…No."

Tomoyasu Ichinomiya still seemed like he wanted to say something, but the bailiff urged him off the witness stand with a sullen expression.

Prosecutor Taki looked uneasy, likely disturbed by how his key witness had been dismantled.

The judge addressed Prosecutor Taki.

"Does the prosecution rest its case?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I believe I've provided sufficient evidence to show that the defendant could indeed be suspected of killing the victim," Prosecutor Taki replied, his expression stern and unwavering.

Hmm, it was rare for the prosecution's case in a murder trial to conclude in just one day. Strange, but not impossible.

…Well, when I think about it, a preliminary hearing is just that — preliminary. So, it was actually more common for it to wrap up in a day.

The prosecutors I usually dealt with liked to drag out their cases over two or three days, nitpicking every detail, so when something finished in a day, it did leave me feeling a bit off balance.

But a murder trial that wrapped up in just one day wasn't necessarily unwelcome. I wouldn't mind getting this over with quickly — but the problem was, I still didn't have a clear idea of how to secure the defendant's acquittal.

In reality, there was no denying that the prosecution presented evidence sufficient to cast doubt on the defendant's actions. I did my best to tear apart the last testimony, but I couldn't say I completely discredited it.

The biggest issue right now was that there didn't seem to be anyone other than the defendant who could've killed the victim.

"Now we'll proceed with the defense's rebuttal," the judge said. "Counsel Yamashika, are you ready?"

"Yes, I am."

I had no choice but to answer that way.

"Very well. Then, please call your witness."

"I call Dr. Honjo, who conducted the victim's autopsy."

The medical examiner, who looked every bit the part of someone who might enjoy performing autopsies, took the stand.

Now, there was only one thing I needed to do next: convince them that the sleazy Ujigami had to take the stand. If I could get him up there, I should be able to land another solid blow on the prosecution.

"Now, Dr. Honjo. It was briefly mentioned during Inspector Kinoshita's testimony, but are you aware of a 'preliminary autopsy' conducted by Mr. Ujigami?"

"Yes, I did receive a report from him."

"So, the testimony you just gave is influenced by Mr. Ujigami's autopsy report, correct?"

"No, not at all. Everything I testified to is based solely on my own autopsy findings."

"But you did read Mr. Ujigami's autopsy report, didn't you?"

"…Yes."

"Did you receive it before or after you conducted your autopsy?"

"Before. I received it via fax before performing the autopsy."

"Please recall the contents of that report. In the end, didn't your autopsy findings align with Mr. Ujigami's conclusions?"

"Yes, they were consistent."

"You first saw Mr. Ujigami's autopsy report. Then, after conducting your own autopsy, you reached the same conclusion as Mr. Ujigami. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Then, isn't it fair to say that you were influenced by Mr. Ujigami's autopsy report?"

"No, even if I hadn't seen his report, I would've reached the same conclusion."

"Is that so? By the way, it's said that the sooner an autopsy is conducted, the better, correct?"

"Of course."

"Mr. Ujigami conducted his autopsy more than ten hours before you did, right?"

"Yes, that's what I've heard."

"And after reading his report, which was based on an autopsy conducted ten hours earlier, you arrived at the same conclusion as Mr. Ujigami, correct?"

"…Yes, that's true."

"So, let me ask you again: can you really say that Mr. Ujigami's autopsy report didn't influence you at all?"

This time, he couldn't immediately shake his head.

"…W-Well, it would be a lie to say that none of his findings were useful."

"Thank you. So, the defense would like to call Mr. Ujigami as a witness."

It just hit me. "Mr. Ujigami", in Japanese, was a palindrome — it read the same forwards and backwards.

…Did that mean I was more relaxed than I thought?

With a faint smile and glasses that gleamed sharply, he had an imposing stature that made him look intimidating no matter what.

Now, here he was, finally approaching the witness stand.

Though he appeared to be just an ordinary doctor about to testify, I couldn't shake the feeling that he was hiding something.

This was Ujigami, after all. The last time I put Kageno on the stand, it was a nightmare. And this guy, who was at least on the same level as Kageno if not even higher, was about to testify. It was only natural to expect some turbulence.

The closer he got to the witness stand, the more my anxiety grew.

But—

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"Yes, I swear."

Surprisingly, Ujigami took the oath with such politeness and care that it left me feeling somewhat deflated.

Well, when I think about it, he was a government official now. And not just any official, but a coroner who regularly worked closely with the police. It wouldn't bode well for him to stir up trouble in court.

On top of that, he was a family man now, so even Ujigami must know when to play it safe.

I reached that conclusion and felt a bit more at ease as I prepared to proceed.

"Now, Mr. Ujigami, please testify about what happened on the night of December 7th."

"Understood. However, to do so, I'll need to go back to the first of this month."

"...Excuse me?"

I blinked in surprise. Why would he need to go that far back?

"I-Is that so? Well, please go ahead with your testimony."

"Very well. It all started on Sunday, December 1st.

I have a wife and a one-year-old daughter. I know it sounds biased coming from a father, but my daughter, who takes after her mother, is absolutely adorable. Just the other day, I was letting her play in the neighborhood park when a boy her age immediately approached and started hitting on her. I had to shoo him away with a stern word, but honestly, I can't wait to see how many hearts she'll break in the future—"

…What was this guy thinking, worrying about a toddler's love life? N-No, that wasn't the point to interrupt him on.

"Um, I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Ujigami."

The judge interjected gently.

"Your family story is heartwarming, but since this is a courtroom, could you please refrain from discussing matters unrelated to the trial?"

"That's a shame. I was about to get to the best part."

I always thought this judge was pretty mild-mannered, but I didn't expect him to be this lenient. In situations like these, I wish he'd snap and say something like, "Enough with the chit-chat! Keep that filthy mouth shut unless you're addressing the court! Do you want to be thrown in jail for contempt?" or something like that.

"Then please continue with your testimony," I urged him to proceed, using the polite language I didn't want to use.

"Yes, yes. So, about December 1st, it was a rare day off for me. So, the three of us — my wife, daughter, and I — went shopping in the local shopping district.

There was a year-end sale going on, and they were handing out raffle tickets. Since we were there, we decided to try our luck, so I let my daughter's little hand turn the raffle drum. And

wouldn’t you know it, she won a hot spring trip on her first try! I mean, she really is my daughter, isn’t she? With luck like that, I’m sure she’ll hit the jackpot in the lottery or horse racing in the future. I’m even planning to consult with the bank on how to manage the millions she’ll win—"

…Was this really the same Ujigami? The same Ujigami who, back in our university days, would mercilessly crush anyone who dared oppose him, even professors, with that smug grin on his face? And now he had become this doting parent?

Or was he just putting on this act to make a fool out of me? No, looking at that oddly blissful expression on his face, I couldn’t believe that was the case.

Could marriage really change a person this much? If that’s true, maybe I should get Kageno hitched to someone — maybe it would improve his personality a bit. …Wait, why the hell was I thinking about this in the middle of a trial?

The judge cleared his throat rather theatrically. Ujigami noticed and bowed his head.

"Oh, my apologies.

Anyway, as I was saying, it’s just by chance that my family and I ended up staying at the inn in the town where the incident occurred."

…What was I asking him about again?

"So, to get back on track, the incident happened on the night of December 7th, when you were staying at the Utakata Inn, correct?"

"Yes. It was around 9 PM when I was called out to take a look at a body."

"And that’s when you went to the scene and performed the autopsy?"

"Yes, that’s correct."

"Please tell us in detail what your findings were."

"The body was found hanging by a rope around the neck.

Normally, I would lower the body before conducting the autopsy, but in this case, the police hadn’t started their investigation yet, so I had no choice but to perform the autopsy with the body still hanging.

My conclusion… matched exactly with what Dr. Honjo testified earlier. This was not a suicide, but rather a strangulation staged to look like a suicide."

"I see. By the way, Mr. Ujigami, what were you doing in your room before Officer Kinoshita called you?"

"Now, what was I doing…?"

"Weren't you drinking?"

"Yes, I had a few drinks, just enough to enjoy myself."

"But didn't you finish off six large bottles of beer?"

For once, a flicker of surprise crossed Prosecutor Taki's face.

He stared at me as if to ask, "How on earth do you know that?" He probably never imagined that I was also drinking heavily along with them.

"Yes, I suppose I did drink about that much."

"Normally, someone who's had that much to drink would be considered drunk, right?"

"Yes, I suppose I was a bit drunk."

"So, you performed the autopsy while intoxicated?"

"Yes, that would be an accurate assessment."

"And the autopsy report you compiled while drunk was passed on to Dr. Honjo, who conducted the official autopsy, influencing his findings, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

Ujigami answered without the slightest hint of hesitation. This should be the kind of moment where he shows a little bit of restraint.

I kept quiet for a moment to give the spectators time to digest the significance of what had just been said.

A coroner, drunk, performing an autopsy. And the sloppy autopsy report he produced ended up influencing both the police investigation and the official autopsy. That's the point I needed them to grasp.

"Let me summarize.

You were called out in the middle of the night, after drinking a considerable amount, and you performed an autopsy on a body found hanging by the neck while still drunk. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's more or less what happened."

"No further questions."

"Hmm…"

Prosecutor Taki's eyebrows shot up.

"Does the prosecution have any cross-examination?"

"Of course!"

Prosecutor Taki leapt to his feet.

"Mr. Ujigami, you've just testified that you were intoxicated when you performed the autopsy on the victim, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Naturally, I find it hard to believe that an autopsy performed while intoxicated could be completely accurate. But Mr. Ujigami, do you believe there were any errors in your autopsy findings?"

"No. I was shown photos of the body before this trial began, and based on the condition of the facial congestion and the petechiae, there was nothing to contradict my initial conclusion that it was 'a strangulation staged to look like a hanging.'"

"Thank you. No further questions."

It seemed things wouldn't be going as smoothly as I hoped.

"Then, for the defense's next witness, I call Detective Kusaka."

To be honest, I was feeling pretty overwhelmed.

The only argument I had prepared for this trial was to assert that Ujigami had performed the autopsy while drunk and that his report, which influenced various departments, might have led to a wrongful arrest. And while that point had some merit, it wasn't enough on its own to secure an acquittal for the defendant.

There was only one question I needed to ask Detective Kusaka, who had just taken the stand. But the real problem would come after that. The only thing left for me to do was to summon every person who might have had a motive to kill the victim and try to poke holes in their alibis.

At this point, I honestly didn't even have a clear suspect in mind. In fact, if someone told me my client was the killer, I might actually believe it.

"Counsel, please proceed with your questions."

Prompted by the judge, I turned my attention to the detective on the stand.

"Detective Kusaka, I just have one question for you. The victim was found hanging by a rope, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So, that rope is assumed to be the murder weapon, correct?"

"That's correct."

"Normally, isn't the murder weapon considered one of the most important pieces of evidence?"

"Yes, generally."

"Then why hasn't the rope been submitted as evidence in this trial?"

Detective Kusaka, being a seasoned officer, didn't show any visible signs of agitation, but instead, he glanced over at Prosecutor Taki as if seeking permission before answering.

Not too long ago, I had handled a case involving a strangulation. In that case, I learned that the object used to strangle the victim often retained crucial evidence linking to the perpetrator. There was a good chance that the rope in this case might also have some traces of evidence.

The fact that the prosecution didn't submit the rope as evidence could mean they were trying to hide something from me. At least, that was one possible interpretation.

However, Prosecutor Taki didn't show the slightest sign of being rattled.

"We, the prosecution, have no issue with that. If the defense so desires, we are more than willing to provide the evidence."

He picked up a plastic bag containing the rope from the table and walked over to my side of the courtroom.

Then, with impeccable formality, he placed it in front of me before calmly returning to his seat.

"Unfortunately, Counsel Yamashika, the prosecution conducted various tests on that rope, but aside from finding traces of the victim's skin tissue, we didn't obtain any significant results. Therefore, we didn't see the need to submit it as evidence for this preliminary hearing. But if you'd like, you're welcome to examine it to your heart's content.

However, as I've mentioned, we've already thoroughly tested it and found no evidence linking it to the culprit. Counsel Yamashika, I've heard much about your courtroom tactics. Please refrain from trying anything underhanded."

He had some nerve.

"Isn't that an insult, Prosecutor Taki? As a lawyer, I've never once engaged in any conduct that would lead to such accusations."

"Oh, my apologies. I retract my last statement and sincerely offer my apologies."

He conceded with a theatrical bow. Seriously, why were all prosecutors like this?

Suppressing my irritation, I turned back to face the judge.

"Your Honor, I'd like some time to carefully examine this piece of evidence. Could we take a short recess?"

The judge glanced at the clock on the wall behind him. It was already 11:50 AM.

"Yes, I suppose it's about lunchtime anyway. Let's take a break until 1:00 PM."

December 10th, 12:05 PM, Defense Counsel Room

The waiting room was furnished with nothing more than a cheap long table and some folding chairs.

After leaving the courtroom, the first thing I did was reassure the Nioka couple, who were visibly anxious about how the trial was going. "Don't worry, just leave the trial to me and go grab some lunch," I told them as I ushered them out the door. There was no point in trying to think with two gloomy faces around, after all.

But still.

"Damn it, so even getting my hands on this thing isn't going to help much, huh?"

I stared absentmindedly at the rope in its plastic bag.

To describe it accurately, it was less of a "rope" and more of a rough, thick cord. I hadn't noticed when I first saw the body hanging from it, but looking at it now, I realized it was surprisingly thick. The diameter must have been around two or three centimeters. It was a coarse, loosely woven rope made from twisted straw. Given that the body was found in an old, musty storage shed, this rope was probably something that had been lying around there. It was an odd comparison, but it would probably make a decent tool for S&M — it's rough enough that it would dig nicely into the skin for those who enjoy that sort of thing.

Just to be clear, I'm not one of those people. And no, I definitely wasn't imagining the rope digging into Yukina's soft skin.

…Anyway.

As expected, there wasn't anything particularly noteworthy about it.

"Kageno, you notice anything?"

I tossed the rope at the deadbeat detective, who was sitting idly in his chair.

But Kageno just glanced at it and tossed it right back at me.

"The prosecution's already examined it, right? If there were any obvious evidence, they would have found it."

I had to agree. When it came to formal investigations, Japan's police and prosecutors were supposedly among the best in the world.

"Staring at this isn't going to get us anywhere. Let's grab some food already. You still owe me, you know."

"Damn it."

I had promised this lousy detective that I'd treat him to a few meals in exchange for his cooperation during the last trial.

I thought it was a cheap price to pay for his help, but now that it was time to actually pay up, I was feeling a bit stingy. Maybe it was because it's him I was treating?

"Hey, why the long faces?"

At that moment, someone suddenly barged into the room. From the voice and the tone, I knew exactly who it was.

"What the hell are you doing here, you damned pest? This is the defense's waiting room. Get lost, prosecutor's dog."

"Come on, don't be so cold. There aren't many people I know in a place like this. Let's grab lunch together. It'll be like old times back in college, the three of us having a meal."

"…Why the hell would I want to remember that? It's one thing in the university cafeteria, but I'm a respectable lawyer now. I can't be causing a scene in a public restaurant."

"Hey now. You're remembering the wrong parts. I'm a respectable, married man these days — I don't cause trouble anymore."

"Yeah, right."

But I wasn't tough enough to go through the afternoon trial on an empty stomach. In the end, with nothing better to do, the three of us headed out for lunch together.

We ended up at a crowded cafeteria near the courthouse.

It was lunchtime, so the place was bustling with people, but we managed to grab a table.

…Though I hadn't really noticed while we were in the courthouse, I suddenly felt awkward being out in public in a yukata in a place that wasn't a hot spring town. I found myself regretting not renting a suit after all.

"Alright, what should I get?"

Ujigami was looking over the menu with an oddly cheerful expression. Here I was, stressing out about the afternoon trial, and he was having the time of his life.

"Welcome! Are you ready to order?"

A young woman who seemed out of place in such a diner came to take our orders.

"Three daily specials… Hey, you guys okay with that?"

Ujigami asked me and Kageno.

"I'm fine with it," Kageno replied.

"Yeah, same here," I said.

Today’s daily special was stir-fried eggplant with miso. Not exactly my favorite, but it wasn’t bad either.

Ujigami turned back to the waitress.

"Alright, make that nine daily specials."

‘Wait a minute.’

Kageno and I shouted in unison.

"What the hell, man! Nine? Who the hell can eat three meals’ worth of food?"

"You guys are pathetic for such big guys. Eat up if you want your brains to work properly."

"You’re an exception," Kageno retorted. "For most people, eating three meals’ worth would just make them too full to even move."

"Tch, fine… Alright, miss, make it five daily specials."

"O-Okay…"

At least order three different meals, why don’t you? I could already imagine five plates of stir-fried eggplant filling up this tiny table, and my appetite dropped by about twenty percent.

"Good grief…"

As the waitress left with a dumbfounded look on her face, I pulled out the rope and started examining it again. It’s not like I had much else to do.

"Oh, Yamashika, is that the rope you were talking about?"

As Ujigami said this, he snatched the rope out of my hands.

"Hey, that’s important evidence! Don’t touch it!"

I hurriedly snatched it back.

At the moment, I was the one responsible for overseeing this piece of evidence. If anything happened to it now, I could be accused of tampering with the evidence.

And right now, Ujigami was a government employee, a dog of the prosecution. There was no guarantee he wasn’t under orders to set me up.

But.

Despite my suspicions, something rare was happening.

The usually unfazed Ujigami, who never let that smile slip from his face, was…

"…"

Stunned.

"Hey, what's up with you? It's not like you to make that face." Kageno remarked.

Ujigami slowly turned his dumbfounded face towards me, moving so stiffly you could almost hear imaginary gears creaking.

"Yamashika. This is the rope the victim was hanging from, right?"

"Yeah, it seems so."

"Hold on a minute! That's not a rope — it's a damn thick straw cord!"

"So what? What's the big deal?"

For this guy to be rattled means something serious is up. Even I could feel the pressure.

Ujigami clicked his tongue and scratched his head.

"Damn it, I can't believe I missed something this simple. I must've been too drunk…"

"What the hell are you talking about? Don't just keep it to yourself — explain."

"What I mean is I might be able to give you some good news.

…Well, it's just a possibility, so it might not be a game-changer."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Anyway, when the trial starts again this afternoon, call me back to the stand. I might be able to help your case a bit."

"Are you saying you're going to testify in my favor? What the hell is this? I can't believe you'd suddenly become the defense's lapdog."

"...Stop with the lapdog thing."

"To me, all witnesses are nothing more than lapdogs. Most of the time, they become obedient with just a bit of training."

Some of them bite, though.

"But still, you haven't answered my question. What's the reason for this sudden change of heart?"

"Hmph, it's true that I'm in a position where I should be siding with the prosecution. But listen, even if you don't believe me, I've become a man dedicated to the truth. I can't just stand by and watch an innocent person get convicted because of my mistake. I wouldn't be able to face Saori if I did."

"…Oh?"

This guy Ujigami, if anything, was an even better liar than Kageno.

Kageno could tell any lie without changing his expression in the slightest, but Ujigami always told his lies with a faint smile. That faint smile was tricky — it gave the impression that Ujigami was always in control, making it impossible to distinguish between his bluffs and his true intentions.

This trait of his hadn't changed at all since our student days. No, if anything, it seemed like his ability to bluff had become even more formidable in the two years since. Now, this bluffing prosecutor's dog suddenly claimed he wanted to help me. I couldn't trust him that easily. If I let my guard down and he pulled the rug out from under me, I'd be humiliated.

But there was one thing that had changed about him. When he mentioned his wife's name, he seemed to transform into a genuinely good person. Over the past few days, I had come to realize that much.

Setting aside the question of whether marriage could change a person that much — the fact is, I was in a bit of a tight spot right now. As much as I hated to, I didn't have much choice but to rely on him.

"Fine, I'll bite. So, if I put you on the stand, what exactly am I supposed to ask you?"

"Ah, it's simple. Listen—"

—The moment Ujigami finished explaining, the mechanism behind the case became crystal clear in my mind.

"…Hey, are you serious?"

"At the very least, I'm not lying. After that, it's just a question of possibility."

"Damn."

If what Ujigami said was true, then everything made sense…

"Hold on, Ujigami."

Kageno, who had been quietly smoking, suddenly spoke up.

"Wouldn't anyone notice something like that just by looking at the marks on the neck? Even if the police and prosecution missed it, that forensic expert, Honjo or whatever his name is, should have that kind of knowledge, right?"

"Well, the victim was hanging there with a rope around their neck for almost twelve hours straight. The rope would have gradually slipped and dug into the skin. By the time that forensic expert got a look at it, there probably weren't any clear marks left. Besides, a forensic autopsy is mainly about examining the body. It's entirely possible that they didn't pay much attention to the rope that was used to strangle the victim."

"I-I see…"

What Ujigami said might just be one possibility.

But for me — or rather, for a Defense counsel — that was more than enough.

December 10th, 1:00 PM, District Courtroom Number 1

"Defense counsel, are you ready?" The judge asked.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Then let's resume the trial. Who is your next witness?"

"The defendant's wife, Mayu Nioka."

During the lunch break, after listening to Ujigami, I called Mayu Nioka and asked her a question. And she couldn't answer it.

That alone was proof that she should be called as a witness. I immediately got her to agree to testify in the afternoon session.

However, I hadn’t told her what she would be testifying about. In fact, I had even warned her, "I’m going to ask you something that might not be very convenient for you." Of course, I reassured her that it would be for the benefit of her husband.

Perhaps because of that, when Mayu Nioka took the stand, she had an extremely uneasy look on her face. That was exactly what I wanted.

"Now then, Mrs. Nioka. You and the defendant were staying at the Utakata Inn together, correct?"

"Yes, that’s right."

"Why did you go there?"

"Why? Well, that’s a difficult question… We’re a married couple, and we both work. My husband recently lost his job, so I became busier with work, and… we really didn’t have much time to spend together, just the two of us.

So my mother arranged a room at the inn for us, telling us to relax for a change. I took some time off work so we could spend some time together…"

So, they were a man and a woman, staying at an inn, spending some quality time alone.

For some reason, that made me feel a bit irritated.

"When did you arrive at the inn?"

"Let’s see… December 6th."

"And how long were you planning to stay?"

"We were supposed to stay until Monday the 9th, so… three nights."

"I see. By the way, I understand that you went home on December 7th, the day of the incident. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that’s right…"

"Why did you leave?"

"We were supposed to stay until Monday, but something came up with work, and I had to go back."

Why was I feeling a bit of schadenfreude right now?

"What time did you leave the inn on the 7th?"

"It was after lunch, so… around 1:00 PM, I think."

"When did you return?"

"The next morning."

In other words, she wasn't at the inn during the time surrounding the victim's murder.

'I'm sorry, but that's a lie. You're the murderer!'

…If only I could say something like that and shock everyone.

Unfortunately, the alibi had already been established by Kageno's investigation.

"Next, could you please describe your relationship with the victim in more detail?"

"Huh? Oh, well, we were parent and child… That's really all there is to say…"

"Let's change the subject. Do you know what day December 7th is?"

"…Huh?"

Nioka blinked in confusion.

It was the same question I had asked her during the lunch break.

"If you didn't understand earlier, let me repeat it. Do you know what day December 7th is?"

"N-No. Nothing comes to mind…"

Nioka gave the same answer she had during the lunch break.

"I see. That's all the questions I have."

It went without saying that everyone in the courtroom tilted their heads in confusion.

And, as expected, Prosecutor Taki didn't have any questions for cross- examination.

"The next witness is Akiyuki Ichinomiya, the victim's husband."

When Ichinomiya took the stand, he had a somewhat uneasy expression on his face, probably because of the testimony he had just heard.

"Now then, Mr. Ichinomiya. My research shows that you married the victim about six years ago. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"How did the two of you meet?"

"I believe I've already testified about that…"

"Could you please testify again? I have a terrible memory, you see."

"Uh, sure, I don't mind…

We met at a small gathering for senior citizens.

At the time, Shoko had just lost her previous husband, and I had also lost my wife, so we were both lonely. That's why we decided to be together."

…It was my own fault for asking, but why did I have to keep hearing about other people's marriages in this trial?

"By the way, I understand that the victim had a considerable amount of assets even before you got married."

"Y-Yes. Well, yes."

"And what about you?"

At that moment, the atmosphere in the courtroom grew tense.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, the woman you were marrying had a significant amount of assets. So I was wondering if you also had comparable assets."

Prosecutor Taki looked like he was about to object, but in the end, he didn't.

"…My assets were… well, I suppose they were average."

"In other words, much less than hers?"

"…Yes, well."

Perhaps it was the wisdom that came with age that allowed him to answer without getting angry.

"By the way, you mentioned that you enjoy keeping fish, correct?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"What kind of fish do you keep?"

"W-What kind? Well… just regular saltwater fish."

"Oh, sea fish, huh? That sounds like it would be difficult to keep."

"Not really, it's not that hard." Ichinomiya answered with a somewhat complicated expression.

"By the way, pets can range from the cheap to the very expensive. I hear some can cost hundreds of thousands, and the equipment to keep them can be just as expensive."

"…Yes, well."

His expression grew more severe.

"How much did the fish you keep cost?"

"J-Just a moment, Your Honor—"

Just as Prosecutor Taki finally began to rise from his seat,

"Enough of this! Just say it already! Are you trying to imply that I married my wife for her money!?"

Ichinomiya shouted, no longer even trying to hide his anger.

"Not at all. I have no intention of touching upon your love and affection for your wife.

I simply want to establish that, thanks to your wife's assets, you were able to indulge in your hobby. Isn't that right, Mr. Ichinomiya?"

"Objection!" Prosecutor Taki shouted energetically. "This entire line of questioning is clearly irrelevant and unnecessary to the case! I request that this entire exchange be stricken from the record!"

"Request denied. Prosecutor Taki, you should understand the defense's intention here. Since the prosecution has cited the inheritance as one of the motives, this line of questioning cannot be said to be unrelated to the case."

"Ugh…"

Prosecutor Taki sat down, looking frustrated. This judge might be surprisingly decent.

"Now then, Mr. Ichinomiya, I'll continue my questions.

I heard a little from one of the inn's employees that you have several very impressive aquariums and that you keep some very expensive fish in them, worth tens of thousands."

"…Yes."

I hadn't actually looked into the fish. But Ichinomiya nodded easily at my bluff.

"They say that you've grown tired of taking care of your wife, who can only manage to go for walks these days, and have become completely devoted to your fish."

Ichinomiya frowned in discomfort, drawing a deep vertical wrinkle between his brows.

"What are you talking about? I've never neglected my wife."

"However, I also heard from the staff that lately you've been spending more time with your fish than with your wife, haven't you?"

Prosecutor Taki stood up.

"Objection! Your Honor, the defense is merely trying to humiliate the witness!"

"I must say, this is indeed a bit excessive. Defense counsel, please restrain yourself."

Humiliate…? Hearing that made me feel like I was some kind of terrible villain. At the very least, I didn't get any pleasure from humiliating an old man.

"Now then, Mr. Ichinomiya, based on your previous testimony, I have a question for you.

Do you know what day December 7th, the day your wife was killed, was?"

It wasn't surprising that a strange tension filled the courtroom at that moment. After all, this was the same question that had confused everyone here just a short while ago.

"…N-No. It was just a Saturday, wasn't it?"

As expected, he gave the answer I anticipated.

Everything was in place. If I dragged this out any further, the jury would lose interest. The time to reveal the truth was now.

"I see. So you didn't even know it was your wife's birthday."

"…Ah."

Finally realizing it, Ichinomiya's mouth fell open in shock.

The audience, too, seemed to understand, nodding their heads as their gazes at the witness stand grew slightly more judgmental.

"According to the inn's employees, on December 7th, your wife's birthday, you spent most of the day with your fish, didn't you?"

"…"

He couldn't seem to answer anymore. He fidgeted in discomfort.

"By the way, I understand that you recently took out a rather large life insurance policy on your wife?"

"What!?"

Ichinomiya's head snapped up. He must have realized that remaining silent on this question would put him in a very bad position, as he quickly began to speak.

"Y-Yes, it's true that I took out life insurance on my wife. But when you say 'recently,' that was ten months ago! And it wasn't just for her, I took one out for myself as well. We're both elderly, after all, and you never know when something might happen to either of us. I think that's something any married couple would do.

Besides, we didn't just start taking out insurance recently. We've had it ever since we got married. That one policy matured about ten months ago, so we simply switched to a different policy for the elderly."

"I see. It was insurance to ensure that neither of you would be burdened if something happened to the other, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But don’t you think that, rather than insurance, your wife would have been much happier if you had remembered her birthday?"

"Objection!"

Prosecutor Taki sprang to his feet.

"That question is leading, irrelevant, and has no bearing on the case!"

"No, Prosecutor Taki. You may think so, but this question is highly relevant to my argument."

"Oh? That is rather intriguing," the judge said.

"But Defense counsel, if that’s the case, you should first establish the relevance of this question."

"Understood. I’ll make the relevance clear with my next witness."

"Very well. Who is your next witness?"

"The person who conducted the initial autopsy on the victim, Mr. Ujigami."

Ujigami took the stand with his usual elusive smile.

There’s no way he would betray me at this point. At least, I wanted to believe that. If he pulled any stunts, I’d tell his wife.

Resolving myself, I turned back to the witness stand.

"Now then, Mr. Ujigami. First, please take a look at this rope."

I approached the witness stand and handed him the rope in the plastic bag.

"Do you recognize this rope?"

"No, not really."

For a moment, a chill ran down my spine.

What was he talking about? He was just looking at it an hour ago!

Was this the real Ujigami after all? Was he planning to show his true colors at this critical moment?

…No, wait. On second thought, if it were revealed that Ujigami came to me and looked at the evidence, it would negatively impact his position as a prosecutor’s dog.

I see. That was why Ujigami was pretending to see the evidence for the first time here.

Understanding the situation instantly, I quickly restructured my planned questions and continued the examination.

"The rope you’re holding was used to hang the victim. Yet you don’t recognize it?"

"That’s right."

"Why not?"

"Well, I was a bit drunk at the time. I remember examining the body thoroughly, but I didn’t really look at the rope."

"Then please take a closer look at the rope now. Do you notice anything unusual?"

Ujigami began to examine the rope. After a while, he looked up and nodded.

"Yes, there is one odd thing."

That faint smile still lingered on his face.

It wasn’t the most impactful performance for the jury, but I couldn’t afford to be picky.

"What exactly is this strange thing you’re talking about?"

Ujigami lightly lifted the rope as if to display it.

"This rope is made by bundling several thick cords together into one. As a result, the weave is unusually large. It might be easier to understand if I say that the rope has very pronounced ridges."

"In other words, the rope is too bumpy, correct? But what does that have to do with this case?"

"It’s simple. As we’ve mentioned several times, with a typical hanging — where the noose is placed around the neck and the person’s body weight is used to evenly compress the neck — strong pressure is applied to the neck in a short period, compressing various vital nerves, causing the heart to stop instantly, leading to death. In such a case, there are no signs of congestion or petechiae in the body, and the face turns pale.

However, if a rope with such large ridges is used, it becomes impossible to fully compress the neck."

"So, you're saying that because of the ridges, the neck wouldn't be evenly compressed?"

"Yes."

"In other words, it wouldn't cause instant death?"

"Exactly."

"What…! No, no way…!"

Prosecutor Taki seemed to realize what I was getting at, and his eyebrows twitched noticeably.

Ujigami continued his testimony.

"In such a scenario, the flow of blood in the neck would be slowly obstructed, just like in a typical strangulation, causing the face to become congested and swollen, as seen in the victim in this case."

"I see. Then, Mr. Ujigami, based on these conditions, let me ask you as an expert: who do you think killed the victim?"

"No, I don't believe this was a homicide."

I could tell the jurors had gasped.

"Not a homicide. So, Mr. Ujigami, are you saying the victim committed suicide?"

I pressed on with my questioning. This wasn't the time to give them a moment to collect their thoughts. I needed to push forward and turn the tables in one go.

"Yes, that's correct. Of course, I wasn't actually there, so this is just one possible scenario.

The victim probably attempted to hang herself in the usual way. But, as I mentioned earlier, due to the problem with the rope she used, the typical symptoms of hanging didn't appear.

It's still just a matter of possibility, but in my personal opinion, I would say this was likely a suicide."

"I see. Thank you. That's all for my questions."

"I would like to cross-examine the witness!"

There was no way Prosecutor Taki could stay silent this time; he stood up with a determined look.

I knew what he was going to ask. He would want to emphasize that Ujigami's testimony was just one possibility.

"Mr. Ujigami, what you just stated is merely one possibility, correct?"

There it was.

"Yes, that's right."

Ujigami nodded obediently, not wanting to stir up any more trouble with the prosecution.

"In other words, it doesn't negate the possibility that, as the prosecution has argued, the defendant strangled the victim with the rope from the second floor and then staged it to look like a suicide, correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"No further questions."

I stood up without hesitation.

"Then allow me to conduct a redirect examination.

Mr. Ujigami, between the theory that the victim committed suicide and the prosecution's theory that it was a homicide, which do you, as an expert, think is more likely?"

"I'll give you my personal opinion.

As a medical examiner, I'm very familiar with this, but in recent years, suicides among the elderly have been on the rise.

The elderly today are people who survived the hardships of the Pacific War. Given what they endured back then, it's hard to imagine they would commit suicide unless under extreme circumstances.

However, suicides are increasing. Why is that? While physical ailments due to age are certainly a factor, the main cause is that they are treated coldly by their families.

Living in cramped homes, leading stressful lives where the children are busy with cram schools and the parents with overtime and part-time jobs, it’s inevitable that the elderly are treated as a burden.

Humans can endure a great deal of physical suffering. But they cannot endure psychological damage. They don’t want to keep living and be a burden to their families, don’t want to be treated coldly — even those who survived the long and harsh wartime can easily turn to suicide when faced with such reasons. As a medical examiner, I’ve seen countless bodies of elderly who took their own lives.

With that in mind, let’s look back at this case. It’s obvious. The victim had been in poor health for the past six months. She must have been deeply depressed and likely felt she was being a nuisance to her husband. Then came December 7th, her birthday. The daughter she had invited left because she had work, and her husband was preoccupied with his hobby. No one even remembered her birthday..."

Ujigami shrugged as he added.

"There’s more than enough reason to believe she committed suicide."

The courtroom fell silent.

Even I couldn’t find any room to insert a word.

"…That concludes my redirect examination."

I never expected Ujigami to give such a lengthy explanation.

We've won. For the first time, I truly believed that.

"Next, I call Mr. Tomoyasu Ichinomiya to the stand."

Now, we were in the final stages.

Thanks to Ujigami, I had been able to present the jury with a reasonable interpretation that would allow them to consider the defendant innocent. The only obstacle remaining was this man’s testimony that he had seen "someone resembling the defendant carrying the victim."

I thought I had thoroughly refuted that testimony during the previous cross-examination, but it wasn’t conclusive. Now, I had to finish it off completely.

"Mr. Ichinomiya, did you say anything to the victim on December 7th? Maybe even just a simple birthday greeting?"

"…N-No, not really."

"That's right. You were drinking and taking a bath, weren't you?

Now, our defense team believes that this case is likely a suicide rather than a homicide.

But if we consider it that way, your testimony clearly contradicts that. So, let me ask you this.

You're aware of the crime of perjury, aren't you? If you lie in court, you can be charged with perjury, which carries a very severe penalty."

Ichinomiya flinched visibly.

"Y-Yes, I'm aware."

"However, perjury is something that's very difficult to prove. Let me use an extreme example. Suppose I asked you, 'What's 1+1?' and you testified that the answer was 3.

Naturally, the correct answer is 2. This is a well-known fact. So if you testified that the answer was 3, everyone would reasonably conclude that you were lying. In that case, even if you genuinely believed that 1+1 equals 3 in your heart, because everyone knows the correct answer is 2, you would be considered to have lied. You wouldn't escape being charged with perjury.

However, humans make mistakes, and the court recognizes that, always giving you a chance to correct your mistake. Even if you testified that 1+1 equals 3, as long as you admit that it was a mistake, you wouldn't be charged with perjury.

Now, with that in mind, let me ask you again.

On the night of December 7th, do you remember seeing someone resembling the defendant carrying the victim from your room?"

"…"

Ichinomiya glanced over at the prosecution's table. I couldn't see the expression on his face, but I could tell that Prosecutor Taki's face had turned red.

Eventually, Ichinomiya turned back to face me. A thin, almost servile smile spread across his face.

"No, now that I think about it, I probably just saw it wrong. I must've gotten mixed up after hearing what the police said. I was drunk, after all. Maybe I mistook a snowman for someone."

"Thank you, that's all for my questions."

"Defense, could you please call your next witness?" The judge inquired.

"No, Your Honor, the defense does not intend to call any more witnesses. With this, we would like to conclude our rebuttal."

"Very well. That means we'll proceed to closing arguments…"

Closing arguments. It felt like it had been a while.

In this trial, I was arguing that it had been a suicide. I believed that theory had already been received with a fair amount of credibility, but since there was no clear perpetrator, I had no choice but to deliver a closing argument to persuade the jury.

I didn't particularly dislike closing arguments. However, in the criminal cases I handled, for some reason, the prosecution often withdrew the charges before we even got to closing arguments, so I hadn't had many opportunities to show my skills.

In a trial, the moments when the Defense counsel shines the most are during witness examinations and closing arguments. It had been a while since I had done a closing argument, so I was feeling a bit more fired up. That said, closing arguments followed a certain template and weren't really a place where you could show much individuality.

"Are both of you ready to proceed with closing arguments immediately?"

The judge asked both me and Prosecutor Taki. There was no reason to refuse.

"Yes. As for the defense, if Prosecutor Taki isn't too weary, we're ready to begin closing arguments right now."

Even I could tell that was a blatant provocation. But with the jurors watching, Prosecutor Taki couldn't very well back down.

However, his response was unexpected.

"Your Honor, we need to review some aspects of our strategy before proceeding with closing arguments. Therefore, we request an extension of the trial."

"…What?"

In the end—

I would lose the opportunity to deliver my closing argument in this trial.

Because after today's session ended and everyone left the courtroom, Prosecutor Taki apparently went to visit Judge Ikegami in secret and told him this:

He was withdrawing the charges.

December 10th, 3:00 PM, In front of the District Court

"Thank you so much, Mr. Yamashika."

Standing on the road in front of the courthouse were the man who, until just a while ago, had been my client, and his wife, both bowing deeply.

"No, no, Mr. Nioka, I'm just glad you were acquitted."

Honestly, I wanted to say, "You're free now, so there's no need to keep me here. Let me go home already." But in a two-hour drama, it was a key moment when the lawyer receives thanks from the client at the end. I had no choice but to play along.

"But… I can't say I'm entirely happy." Mayu Nioka said, looking down.

"In the end, my mother committed suicide, didn't she? From what you said, Mr. Yamashika, part of the blame for driving her to that rests with me…"

'That's right. If you'd at least remembered your mother's birthday, I wouldn't have had to be separated from Yukina for so many days. You should be ashamed of yourself.'

…Of course, I couldn't very well say that.

"What's done is done. More importantly, from now on, the two of you should live your lives to the fullest, for your mother's sake as well. If you do that, I'm sure Shoko Ichinomiya will be happy wherever she is."

I chose my words as carefully as I could.

"Yes… Thank you." Mayu Nioka bowed her head once more, with tears in her eyes.

But that's not how it was. Shoko Ichinomiya hanged herself in absolute despair. Saying, "If you live for her sake, it will somehow make up for it," is nothing but self-satisfaction. As long as you're alive, you can cry as much as you want, but the dead are beyond tears.

…Not that I'd ever let them know what I was really thinking.

"Mr. Yamashika, where are you headed next?" Koji Nioka asked.

"Of course, I'm planning to head back home… Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, actually, I know a few good places around here. If you don't mind, we'd love to treat you to a meal as a thank you."

Don't be ridiculous. Why did I have to eat with this couple? I had had enough of being subjected to their lovey-dovey antics.

"No, I wouldn't want to intrude on your time together. Now that you're free, you should be focusing on your relationship as a couple."

"Y-Yes, you're right." Koji Nioka said, blushing for some reason.

…Why did I have to say things like this? Honestly, it was tough playing the part of the nice lawyer.

"Well, I'll be heading off then. If you ever get into trouble with the police again, feel free to contact me."

"Yes, thank you so much for everything."

The Niokas bowed their heads once more.

'Do you really think just bowing your heads will fix everything?'

I held back the urge to say that and headed for the parking lot where my car was.

December 10th, 8:05 PM, In front of Yamashika Law Office

I was in front of the old building where my law office was located. It had been three days since I last came back here.

But as I reached the front of the building, I felt a strange sense of unease.

I had driven straight back from the courthouse, reluctantly dropping off Kageno and Ujigami at their homes along the way, so it was already completely dark outside.

I glanced up at my office, tucked away in a corner on the second floor.

For some reason, the lights were on in the office, which was supposed to be empty.

I wasn't stupid enough to leave my office unlocked for days on end.

The frightening possibility crossed my mind that some delinquent kid might have broken in after running away from home, but I hoped that wasn't the case.

I had given Yukina a key so she could come and go freely, but since I hadn't told her what time I'd be back today, I didn't think she'd be in the office at this hour.

Or maybe she was waiting for me to celebrate my victory?

…With that rather convenient fantasy in mind, I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

I crept toward the office entrance. But thinking about it calmly, the most likely scenario was an intruder — a burglar.

If it was indeed a burglar, I could give them a bit of a rough welcome and still be within my rights under self-defense. I could probably get away with roughing them up so much that they wouldn't even think of retaliating. After all, the past few days had been nothing short of frustrating. This would be a good chance to blow off some steam.

I kicked the door open with all my might and quickly rushed inside.

"Eek!"

But as soon as I heard that familiar scream, I froze in place.

Inside the office, Yukina was sitting alone, watching TV.

"W-What the hell, Yukina? Don't scare me like that."

"I-I'm the one who was scared! What's gotten into you?"

"Well, the lights were on in the office, even though it was supposed to be empty. I thought it was a burglar…"

In other words, I had mistaken Yukina for a thief.

Even someone as kind-hearted as Yukina might be angry with me, I thought, but this time, my fears were unfounded.

"That's not important! Mr. Zenko, you need to see this!"

Yukina urgently grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the TV.

"—The body has been identified as Akiyuki Ichinomiya, 73 years old. Mr. Ichinomiya was visiting the hot springs in Abuku Town for a relaxing getaway."

"…What?"

For a moment, a familiar name flickered through my ears.

“They detected sleeping pills in the body, and the police are investigating the case from all angles, including the possibility of an accident or suicide.”

And then, the image of a face appeared on the monitor.

There was no mistaking it. I had just seen him less than half a day ago, so it was only natural.

Akiyuki Ichinomiya. He was the husband of Shoko Ichinomiya, who had been murdered just recently. He was also the father-in-law of Koji Nioka, who had been my client until half a day ago.

“…Well, this is getting interesting.”

“Yes. The body was discovered around 6 PM, in a river flowing through Abuku Town.”

“I see.”

Just a little over two hours ago. Since the body was found in a river, the cause of death was likely drowning. The fact that sleeping pills were detected gives the case a whiff of foul play…

Well, in any case, this was no longer any of my concern. After all, Abuku Town was far from here. It was too much of a hassle to go, and I wasn't about to be separated from Yukina again.

Of course, if Koji Nioka were to be arrested on suspicion of murder again, that would be a different story. That would be far too interesting to pass up. Depending on the circumstances, I might even consider defending him.

But that wasn't likely this time. That couple was probably having dinner somewhere near the courthouse right about now.

“By the way, Yukina, what are you doing here?”

“Huh? I was waiting for you to come back, Mr. Zenko. I’ve already got dinner ready so it can be heated up right away.”

I cheered internally.

What a thoughtful gesture from Yukina. She had waited for me, not knowing when I would return.

Dropping Kageno off at his house had been a pain, but if the reward was dinner alone with Yukina, I had no complaints.

More importantly, this was my chance. It was our first meeting in days. And we were alone. This was the perfect opportunity to finish what we couldn't at the inn.

I put on my most gentle expression and said:

"Thank you, Yukina. You waited for me on purpose, didn't you?"

As I said this, I casually draped my arm around her shoulders as she watched TV, ready to make my move — and that's when it happened.

A buzzing sound I didn't want to hear came from my inside pocket.

"Oh, Mr. Zenko, your phone's ringing."

'Forget about it!'

…is what I wanted to say, but I didn't know how the ever-so-earnest Yukina would react.

With a heavy heart, I reached for my phone.

If it was just Kageno or Satsuki, I would've hung up immediately and marked it as a prank call. But the caller ID was blocked.

"Hello, this is Yamashika Law Office." I suppressed my anger as I answered.

"…Oh, Mr. Yamashika. Sorry for calling out of the blue."

It was a familiar voice.

'If you're going to apologize right off the bat, don't call me in the first place, damn it!'

…is what I wanted to shout, but I held back the urge.

It was the man who had been my client until just half a day ago.

"What's going on? You've already been acquitted, so what could you possibly need from me?"

"Well, you see… We've run into a bit of a problem."

I sighed. It had to be something related to Akiyuki Ichinomiya, who'd been mentioned in the news earlier. Probably someone close to him got arrested, and now they wanted to hire me as their lawyer.

"Who got arrested this time? Was it perhaps that attending physician?"

"No, actually… It's me and my wife."

"…Huh?"

For a moment, I couldn't comprehend what he was saying.

"We've been arrested again. On suspicion of killing my father-in-law."

"W-What did you say!?"

When I learned that I had lost the chance to deliver the closing argument in Koji Nioka's trial, I was left with a sense of frustration, as if I had unfinished business.

However, I had no idea that this time, I'd be forced to argue extensively against a prosecutor I despised so much.

And in the end, tonight, too, romance would vanish like the morning dew.

(To be continued)

Afterword

…Well, this is awkward.

It seems this book has taken on a life of its own. It's just the first part, a prelude. The story will continue in the next volume…

Honestly, I've wanted to try this two-volume format for a while now, but in this cutthroat industry, it's never easy to secure a promise that the next book will be published.

However, thanks to all of your support, it seems that the Tactical series has finally gained some stability. Recently, I was fortunate enough to hear from the editorial department that I no longer need to worry about whether or not the next book will be published. So, with that reassurance, I decided to take on this challenge of structuring the story in this way.

It's definitely not because I originally planned to finish the story in one volume, but it just kept getting longer as I wrote, so I had no choice but to split it into two volumes. No, absolutely not. Of course not.

…So, I'm hoping the continuation, Volume 6, will be released in December of this year… or so I'm thinking. I'm also worried about whether those of you who have read this first part will feel motivated to buy the second part, and I apologize for the three-month gap between releases. However, I'll do my best to ensure that the story doesn't become confusing, so please, I hope you'll stick with me and wait for the continuation.

There are still a lot of things I'd like to write about in this afterword, but I'll save those for after the next volume is finished…

So then, until next time.

師走トオル

しわすとおる●埼玉県在住。『タクティカル・ジャッジメント』で第2回富士見ヤングミステリー大賞準入選に選ばれる。同作にて作家デビュー。その後新シリーズ『がらくたのフロンティア』を発表。ゲームと名のつくものなら、なんでも大好き。最近は、オヤジギャグ増加の傾向にあるようだが、本人に自覚はない……ようだ。

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